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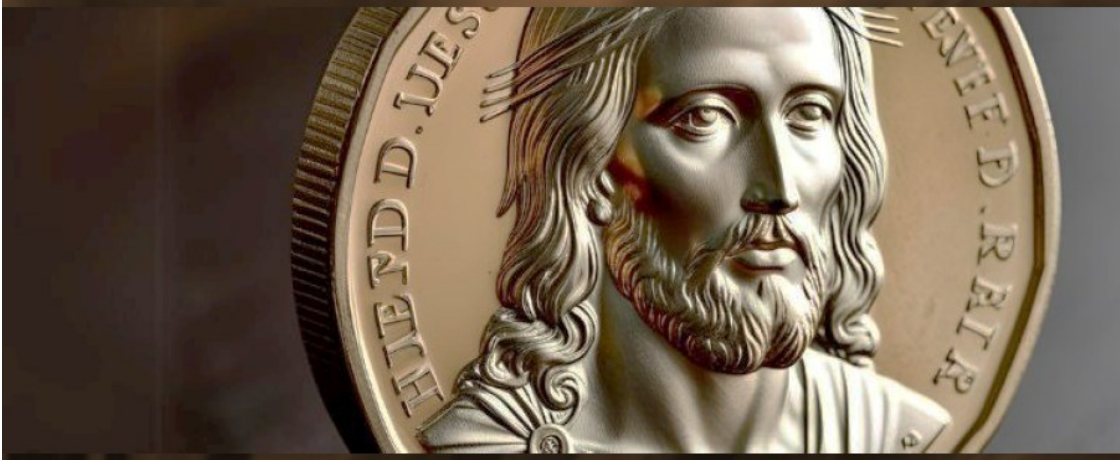

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Editorial

As will become apparent in the report of our Annual General Meeting, and a letter accompanying this printed copy of our journal, this may be the last edition of 'Faith and Thought' in its present form. That does not mean the end of 'The Victoria Institute' (to use the formal name of our society), far from it. As the papers from this year's symposium show, we are still able to generate and exchange creative thought on the interaction of science and Christian faith. Moving to a more on-line form will make better use of our resources (thereby helping the environment) and enable us to reach a wider audience. If you have problems accessing on-line material, provision can still be made to assist you.

If you wonder where 'Money' fits in with both science and faith (apart from financing them!), you are probably as sceptical as the contributors that economics is a science – see the papers on pages 14 and 23.

Bob Allaway (Editor)

Convergent Evolution, the constraints of nature, and how it informs science and religion

Samuel McKee, Manchester Metropolitan University

Abstract: Convergent Evolution is a grand unifying theory in the biological sciences. It applies evenly across life from genetics through to medicine and everything in between. Rather than the evolution of life being a free, open space where any shape, form or possibility takes place, life in the universe is highly constrained and follows regular successful avenues. The constraints on nature placed by evolution suggest life itself has a blueprint. There is growing reflection on the implications of convergence for our understanding of both the emergence and intrinsic nature of life itself, but what are the theological implications? Professor Simon Conway Morris among others have suggested that biology contains a deep structure and chance itself may play only a passing role. The natural world, like the cosmos, appears to be somewhat "fine-tuned". Parameters guiding convergent evolution include developmental, environmental, molecular and cellular constraints. Here I will explore the details of this "deep structure" and whether it is a gift or stumbling block to suggestions of design in the natural world.

Keywords: Convergent Evolution, Evolutionary Biology, Science and Religion, Natural Theology, Argument from Design, Chance.

Introduction:

When considering what life is in the context of the story of life on Earth, convergent evolution is a necessary aspect of the discussion. This is because convergence is ubiquitous across the subdisciplines of the life sciences and there is now an abundance of data demonstrating it. However, convergence is not discussed as much as it should be in the theological considerations of natural theology. Part of the reason for this is it is relatively new in the context of the history of natural theology. An unfortunate consequence of this is that convergence has

not been brought to bear on the argument for design which has often been framed in opposition to evolutionary biology. Nevertheless, in recent years[1] thanks to the work of figures such as Cambridge University's Professor Simon Conway Morris, the data of convergent evolution has been introduced to the discussion.

Convergent evolution is the "recurrent tendency of biological organization to arrive at the same solution to a particular need."[2] As opposed to divergent evolution where a common ancestor has traits that are passed down separate lineages that branch off into subspecies and beyond, convergence sees the evolution of the same solution to a problem in species that have no shared ancestor possessing this solution.

Good examples of convergence include the camera lens eye which has evolved at least 15 different times convergently as opposed to divergently. Wings have evolved in dinosaurs, insects, birds, bats, and in a rudimentary form in flying squirrels, and yet with the exception of birds and dinosaurs they have not inherited this from each other. Body plans for swimming are remarkably similar in sharks and cetaceans but are not inherited from a common ancestor. The remarkable similarities between marsupials and placental mammals are many and varied, yet have emerged through evolutionary convergence, rather than through a common ancestor that possessed them.

Perhaps much more impactfully, convergence is seen at the molecular level in examples that directly refer to human health, such as immune cells. Recent papers on protein structural evolution have demonstrated that we continue to see convergence at the level of protein structure[3]

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[1] See for example, Jackson, Andrew & Conway Morris, Simon. (2021). Theological Implications of Simon Conway Morris's Portrayal of Convergent Biological Evolution. Science & Christian belief. 33. 2-19.

[2] Conway Morris, Simon. *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), kindle location 166.

[3] Konno N, Miyake K, Nishino S, Omae K, Yanagisawa H, Tsuru S, Nishimura Y, Kikkawa M, Furusawa C, Iwasaki W. Repeatability of protein structural evolution

in important enzymes. Many important elements of the adaptive immune system arose through convergence rather than divergence in jawless fish compared to jawed vertebrates.[4]

Convergence can be found in the most unexpected and remarkable of places, such as sex pheromones in elephants that are almost identical to that found in over 100 species of butterflies.[5] Elephants and butterflies certainly have no common ancestor in possession of this pheromone and yet have evolved independently the same solution to a reproductive challenge.

Convergence is characterised across biology and the life sciences in every subdiscipline, and is relevant in informing everything from medicine to whole population ecology. It truly operates as a grand unifying theory in the life sciences, and is thus well suited to the words of Theodosius Dobzhansky that "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution."[6] Convergence allows us to better understand, and even predict, molecular structure in terms of drug discovery and disease as well as features of the whole organism.

Is Life Constrained?

The ultimate claim of convergent evolution is that life itself is constrained. As Conway Morris writes: "there are certainly aspects of evolution that appear to be constrained, if not predictable."[7] This has been extrapolated into the predictions of what life on other worlds

following convergent gene fusions. Nat Commun. 2025 Sep 22;16(1):8278. doi: 10.1038/s41467-025-63898-x. PMID: 40983608; PMCID: PMC12454647.

[4] Flajnik MF, Kasahara M. Origin and evolution of the adaptive immune system: genetic events and selective pressures. Nat Rev Genet. 2010 Jan;11(1):47-59. doi: 10.1038/nrg2703. Epub 2009 Dec 8. PMID: 19997068; PMCID: PMC3805090.

[5] Zaremska V, Renzone G, Arena S, Ciaravolo V, Buberl A, Balfanz F, Scaloni A, Knoll W, Pelosi P. An odorant-binding protein in the elephant's trunk is finely tuned to sex pheromone (Z)-7-dodecenyl acetate. Sci Rep. 2022 Nov 21;12(1):19982. doi: 10.1038/s41598-022-24214-5. PMID: 36411331; PMCID: PMC9678865.

[6] Dobzhansky, Theodosius, et al. *Evolution* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1977), 19.

[7] Conway Morris, Simon. *The Deep Structure of Biology* (Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2008), location 68 (Kindle).

could look like, the idea being that armed only with the carbon or silicon basis of life, knowledge of the planets gravity and gaseous makeup, one could predict to a high level of accuracy what the life would look like. Richard Dawkins and Ernst Mayr have made similar predictions[8] that life on other worlds will be constrained to Darwinian mechanisms and most probably carbon-based, given the propensity for silicon to explode at reasonable temperatures.

Conway Morris is ruthless on the issue of constraint. He states plainly that "By no means everything is possible; in fact nearly everything is impossible."[9] For starters, stereochemistry and the various forces also highly constrain what it is possible for life to do. Stereochemical organisation means that life can be organised around certain structures but is not entirely free. Force fields, bonding, electromagnetism, gravity and a host of other rule-governing factors limit the processes of life to following highly constrained avenues of organisation. Life simply cannot go wherever it wishes. Things are destined to look somewhat familiar across the different kingdoms, of which there are never going to be many.

The result of all this is that evolution will follow certain paths of organisation. Nature is destined to find the same answer to many of the same questions across kingdoms, phyla, class, order, family, genus and species.

When Nobel laureate Jacques Monod originally penned *Chance and Necessity*[10] in 1970, molecular biology was beginning to explode as a discipline and the importance of the genetic code was better understood. However, the controversy surrounding the place accorded to blind chance was fierce, and Monod's claims were contested heavily in counter books and conferences. What Stephen Jay Gould did was develop this more into the story of life from the environmental and

[8] See Brockman, John (ed). *Life: The Leading Edge of Evolutionary Biology, Genetics, Anthropology, and Environmental Science* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2016).
[9] Conway Morris, Simon. *The Runes of Evolution*, 10.
[10] Monod, Jacques. *Chance and Necessity* (London: Harper Collins, 1972).

macro-ecology sense in his writings. The argument for chance and necessity was then firmly entrenched at the end of the 20th century from the micro and macro levels.

Simon Conway Morris:

What Simon Conway Morris (as well as others) did in the early 21st century was to completely flip the perspective of the story of life at both of these levels against a backdrop of immense data from across the life sciences. Conway Morris, who is professor of Paleobiology at Cambridge University, a Life Fellow of St John's College, and a Fellow of the Royal Society for 30 years, argued convincingly in his writings that if we were indeed to "rewind the tape" as Gould stated, we would indeed end up with life identical or almost identical to what we have today. As Oxford University scientist and theologian Celia Deane-Drummond writes:

> "Simon Conway Morris's alternative evolutionary hypothesis that puts far greater weight on the phenomena of convergence points toward the possibility of a form of evolutionary "purpose," though it is perhaps more accurate to speak of a "restrained contingency" (Conway Morris 2003; 2008). The intention of this article is not so much to enter into biological debates about which theory of evolution is the most reasonable as to engage from a theological point of view using natural law theory with Conway Morris's hypothesis."[11]

Conway Morris' presentation of convergent evolution points the data strongly towards contingency, purpose, constraint and a deep structure to biology. These are ideas strongly in harmony with a Christian vision of nature. They also seem to stand against the premise put forward so strongly by Monod and others such as Francis Crick.

[11] Deane-Drummond, 982.

In *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*, Conway Morris shows convergence as a central organising principle[12]; a feature, not a bug. Yet how can purpose be hard-wired into nature that progresses without meaning? Darwin himself knew that Nature and evolution have no predetermined outcome. Evolution does not know where it is going and does not proceed with foresight, yet an overwhelming sense of purpose seems to emerge.[13]

Directionality and Predictive Convergence:

At the molecular level, the protein space is vast. As we have already seen, there are constraints such as stereochemistry, bonding and electromagnetic forces, but the expansive landscape of biology may be even more restrictive than this.[14]

The compromise to the issue of purposiveness versus lack of meaning or foresight is *directionality*. In his 2015 work *The Runes of Evolution*, Conway Morris presents Nature as "probing the vast spaces of biological hyperspace."[15] Evolution, though not linear, shows directionality. In probing the vast space, the same winning strategies show up again and again across life. The strength of this case is that it confirms the extraordinary power of adaptation.[16] But in doing so, evolution "rediscovers the inevitable."[17] There are only so many successful configurations. To put it another way, the test may be multiple choice, but there are only a few good answers to choose from. For life, only a few things actually *work* among the vastness of possibility.

What this means for the idea of predictability in evolution is that there is "a sense of evolutionary inevitability."[18] Indeed, the sheer weight of

[12] Conway Morris, *Life's Solution*, kindle location 225.
[13] Ibid, 2.
[14] Ibid, 11.
[15] Conway Morris, Simon. *The Runes of Evolution* (Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2015), 3.
[16] Ibid, 4.
[17] Ibid, 19.
[18] Ibid, 6.

data on convergence leaves little room for thinking otherwise. Wings, camera lens eyes and immune cells give us the impression that of course Nature will pull the same trick out of the bag to ensure survival of certain groups that verge anywhere near the same avenue of success.

Is there a "deep structure" to biology?

The strength of momentum of the conversation on convergent evolution led to the 2008 academic forum *The Deep Structure of Biology*, edited by Conway Morris. It called into open debate the ideas of purpose and contingency to considerations of nature[19] that had been raised by scientists, philosophers and theologians alike. Convergent evolution cries out for an explanation. The same question emerging constantly among the sciences and humanities is *why*? What is it that sets the foundations of life, or the "deep structure of biology"?

The debates around vitalism in the early to mid-20th century, before the advent of molecular biology moved the conversation, saw life as a puzzle in need of all the pieces, but then in need of something more to animate them once fully assembled. The need for the right pieces to solve certain problems in life is what Conway Morris refers to as "islands of stability"[20] that allow for life to thrive in ways that other solutions do not. Whilst vitalism is not a live debate as it once was a century ago, convergence moved the debate away from Monod's supposed settling of the issue over half a century ago.

There is an interesting parallel to the question of the deep structure of biology in theology with that of the so-called "fine tuning" of the universe in physics (also known as the Anthropic Principle). The sense that the foundations of the universe as well as life are perfectly adapted to solve the problem of life in the first place is uncanny. If it is

[19] Deane-Drummond, Celia. *Plumbing the depths: A recovery of natural law and natural wisdom in the context of debates about evolutionary purpose.* Zygon, vol. 42, no. 4 (December 2007).
[20] Conway Morris, *Life's Solution*, 127.

indeed the case that both do indeed have a pre-ordered and highly constrained deep structure, then the Christian theologian has an answer that readily fits the data. This will not satisfy the scientist looking for mechanism but it may make do for the philosopher.

Conway Morris argues powerfully that "the emergence of human intelligence is a near-inevitability."[21] This compounds the issue further if correct. The question as to whether consciousness is fundamental rather than merely an emergent phenomenon has been well explored recently over the issue of The Anthropic Principle[22] by many. There is not scope here to address the question of consciousness or its ubiquity, but the question of whether consciousness is fundamental may here be tied to the question of whether life is inevitable. If life emerges inevitably against the background of a conscious universe then it becomes a little easier to see how life might be constrained by a directionality brought about by mind. And if mind is the decisive answer to the apparent purposiveness and directionality of life then again, the Christian theist has a readily suitable answer.

Why we should be cautious to label it "design":

Despite all of this, my approach is more cautious. I do not see in convergence a scientific answer to the argument for design in philosophy of religion. Deane-Drummond concurs in saying that "Natural law offers a way of describing the ordered action of God toward complexity in a contingent world without using the language of either "design" or "progress.""[23] The design argument, carrying with it the heritage of William Paley's "watchmaker" argument pre-Darwin, should not be placed atop of the data of convergent evolution.

The irony here is that because of the preponderance of data from convergent evolution across the life sciences there is far more weight

[21] Conway Morris, *Life's Solution*, kindle location 174.
[22] For example, see Goff, Philip. *Why? The Purpose of the Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
[23] Deane-Drummond, 981.

to lean on than any arguments made by those from creationist Christian ministries (such as those from "Intelligent Design" creationism) that are inferences from far less data and that have constantly been debunked by subsequent scientific investigation. This is because these ministries and their arguments deny evolution in the first place, and are therefore cutting themselves off from perhaps the best case, and most readily accepted arguments for purpose and intention in the life sciences. No one denies convergent evolution at all, and Conway Morris is held in the highest regard in evolutionary biology.

Dr Zachary Ardern is among a few modern evolutionary biologists that do feel there is room for a new form of the design argument (free from its predecessors) on the basis of convergence, developmental genetics, and the molecular constraints previously discussed. These have been explored at The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge.[24] They are interesting, and rooted in hard science, but they are also speculative as those expressing these views will be the first to acknowledge.

My main contention against calling it design is that the historical story of convergence as shown in the last two centuries is that new data changes the conversation. We should be appropriately cautious in what we infer from scientific data. At present biology is in a revolutionary status due to the data revolution brought on by cheap, accurate and fast gene sequencing. There are parallel leaps being made in structural biology too. Bioinformatics as a discipline is highly sought after as is biocuration, yet these disciplines did not exist thirty years ago. Prudence would suggest that now is not the time to be making claims of design.

Furthermore, our parallel with the Anthropic Principle also shows how much can change in a generation. New data brought about by new technology, as well as next generation technological leaps, have raised

[24] https://talks.cam.ac.uk/talk/index/220771

more questions rather than settling the issue on fine tuning. The lesson here is to step back from certainty rather than towards it.

Finally, philosophy of science will always have a lot to say here in contrast to philosophy of religion. As Karl Popper famously showed us on the issue of falsification, ruling *out* is preferable to ruling *in*. Data is good, and convergence suffers no lack of data, but more data is always preferable and there remains far too much uncertainty, far too many questions, and a great deal more to learn about the nature of life. Furthermore, we must always be cautious when working with an *N* of 1. We have only observed life on this planet and have no other world data to work with.

Concluding thoughts:

Our understanding of evolution has grown tremendously in the past generation. Conway Morris can rightly conclude that "Yes, evolution is divergent, but at each and every step it will be accompanied by convergence."[25] Much as with The Anthropic Principle, convergence provides interesting data and poses serious questions to be answered. However, there is too much uncertainty and it is not wise to bring this into an argument *for* God's existence. Convergence, being apparent across biology, is a crucial aspect of the discussion as to the nature of life. The constraints on life from convergence tell us a great deal about life, but not what it is.

We should reasonably conclude that life is creative, but cannot progress much further. This in itself raises a host of other interesting questions which can be probed by the new biology in tandem with philosophy and theology. It is more than acceptable to bring these humanities into the conversation given the issue of biology's deep structure as the answers in no way appear to be molecular or atomic. Given our current understanding of the laws of nature, and with no new laws on the horizon, our present story of life shows a Nature that is not entirely governed by chance and necessity, but also shows

[25] Conway Morris. *The Runes of Evolution*, 33.

features of directionality and high levels of constraint. The theological answers to the question of convergence are not irrelevant – they are a serious answer to a serious question.

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Money in the Time and Teaching of Jesus
David Instone-Brewer

When we think about money in the time of Jesus, it is best to think in terms of credit cards. Not because they had anything like a Visa or Mastercard, but because they understood coinage with as much vagueness as we understand this piece of plastic. How does the magnetic strip work? Who actually holds our money? How does the transaction travel between the shop and our account? What is the interest rate we are liable for if we go into credit?

By Jesus' day, coins had been used for about six centuries. King Alyattes of Lydia in modern-day western Turkey, first made coins in about
600 BCE. However, these were of mixed value – literally. They were made of electrum which is a mixture of gold and silver in varying quantities, so the value of each coin was uncertain. His son Croesus became fabulously rich by being transparently honest. He used a new method of refinement to create coins of 99% gold.

By heating electrum to 800 degrees along with sea salt, the silver separated off as silver chloride deposits which could then be used to make pure silver coins. His coins were, for the first time in history, an exact value, because they were pure gold or silver, and they were standard sizes. Technologically, this was as impressive as inventing the first bitcoin, and the seeming magical technique of refinement still fascinated people in the first century, as seen when the NT uses it as a metaphor for personal purification (1Pet.1.6-7; 1Cor.3.12-15).

The Chinese also introduced money at about the same time, though their coins were in the shapes of small daggers and spades – perhaps indicating the two main sources of wealth: farming and fighting. They also made a useful innovation: a hole, so they could be strung together in hundreds to save lots of counting.

But the icing on the cake came, almost literally, when Alexander the Great imprinted his face into coins. When he conquered Lydia in

334 BCE, he 'inherited' the technology of purification. His coins spread throughout his empire – that is, throughout the ancient world from Greece to India. This was arguably the most successful advertising campaign in history, because his name and face became known universally. Almost everyone owned a picture of him! It also transformed commerce, because the same standard exchange was accepted everywhere, so the complex bartering system was replaced by coins, which were easy to carry, and hard-wearing, and didn't get sick like chickens or cows.

The Romans copied Alexander's coins, with new faces, and spread them even into Britain. And they made their use compulsory, because everyone they conquered had to pay a poll tax (the *tributum capitis*) – one denarius per year from every male over 14 years old. So suddenly, even if you lived life in your village by bartering with each other, you had to get hold of a coin. This was as transformative and unsettling as if a country decided that every homeless person had to get a bank account because all welfare payments were to be electronic. In Roman times, many poor people in rural communities would have found it difficult and expensive to get hold of coinage because they never sold anything for coins or bought anything. They would, in effect, have to buy a coin, and no doubt those selling them would set a high price, knowing that the buyer was desperate, helpless and ignorant.

Fortunately, Israel was relatively sophisticated, especially by the time of Jesus. Markets were common, merchants travelled through the land, and there was even a strong export economy to the Romans who were hungry for pickled fish, spices, olive oil and even religious books. So there were many coins in circulation at the time of Jesus. Even women were allowed buy and sell on their own in marketplaces, so individual farmers could sell their produce in exchange for coins. However, there was a different problem.

The Romans demanded a new tax, which was relatively small, but it had to be paid in coin. Merchants already had to pay about 5% toll taxes every time they crossed a territorial border or travelled through a city

such as Samaria –what we now call a tariff. A delivery of fish from James and John's town of Bethany had to leave Philip's tetrarchy, cross Antipas' territory, and cross into Samaria and out again into Judea, as well as pass through the cities of Samaria and Shechem – that's 8 customs' points at 5% each, totalling about 40% of the value of the goods. Actually, when the Romans took over Judea and Samaria as a single province, this halved the number because Roman cities didn't charge tolls. And the amount paid in poll tax was a much smaller percentage. At a denarius (a day's wage for labourers) this was about 0.5% of the annual income of a low paid workers and much less for better paid people like fishermen. All this suggests that the poll tax would be a minor irritation, but instead it caused riots.

This poll tax was hated, because all conquered people had to pay it, but Roman citizens didn't. Thousands were killed in the Jerusalem riots when it was introduced soon after the census of Quirinius, just after the birth of Jesus. And the anger was still simmering when they showed Jesus a Roman coin as a trick question in the Temple: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Mat.22.17//Mark.12.14//Luke.20.22). They handed him a denarius – the coin used for this tax – and he asked whose face was on the coin. When they said "Caesar's, his response was unanswerable: "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mat.22.21//Mark.12.17//Luke.20.25).

Does Jesus' response mean that he didn't really care about money? He certainly cared about the money changers in the Temple. His disruption, by turning over all their tables that day, was probably the last straw that sealed his death (Mat.26.3-4//Mark.14.1-2//Luk.22.1-2). The Pharisees had already started plotting to kill him while he was still in Galilee (Mat.12.14//Mark.3.6//Luke.6.11) but the priestly Sadducees had enough political clout to persuade the Romans to use their power of execution. They also had more to lose, because the Temple made them rich.

The priesthood had two fairly sophisticated accounting scams. The first was the contracts they wrote for merchants supplying wood and oil etc

for the Temple. These set the price at the current market value, but said that if the market rate went up, they'd still pay the old lower price, though if the market rate went down, they'd pay the new lower price (m.Sheq.4.9)[1]. And, presumably, the priests would pocket the difference. The second was the Temple tax: an annual rate of two denarii or half a shekel per adult male. There was nothing wrong with this: the rate had been set by Nehemiah. But they demanded that the people pay using coins minted in Tyre, which were about 95% silver whereas Roman coins were only 90% silver. This meant the money changers charged more for the Tyrian coins and presumably shared this profit with the priests who allowed them to set up shop in the Temple.

Jesus hated these scams – but surely the Temple needed money? Actually, the problem with money was that they had too much. Every now and then a priest came and took three scoops of coins to pay for the offerings, and no-one knew what happened to the rest. The rabbis did discuss this, and naively assumed that the gold walls of the Holy of Holies were thickened every year (m.Sheq.4.3-4) – though it was common knowledge that the Sadducees (mostly priests) lived in luxury (ARNa.5=ARNb.10; Jos.Ant.13.297-8). This was somewhat confirmed archaeologically by the luxury of a house reasonably identified as that of the High Priest Caiaphas which even contained a lump of purple *murex* dye (which was more valuable than gold) that was presumably lost among the rubbish.

I suspect that most people didn't understand how money worked. They knew that they got paid, and they knew that people made more money simply by giving their money to bankers – as in the parable of the talents or pounds (Mat.25.27//Luke.19.23). But this parable involved a talent of gold – ie about 80 lb, which was literally as much as a man could carry (the original definition of a 'talent'). This was outside the

[1] Rabbinic references start with 'm' for Mishnah, 't' for Tosephta, 'y' for Jerusalem Talmud ('Yerushalmi') and 'b' for Babylonian Talmud ('Bavli').

experience of normal people, and they had no conception how money could make money.

However, they did have a concept of 'treasure in heaven', and this too produced 'interest' which you could spend on earth, while the capital remained in heaven (y.Peah.1.1). They believed that wealthy Jews were extremely good Jews who had vast treasure in heaven which produced lots of interest, as evidenced by their wealth. That's why they couldn't believe a wealthy man wouldn't get to heaven – his wealth was already proof of God's reward to him. Jesus disagreed with this. He said: "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" but instead of continuing with "and God will pay you interest on earth" (like they expected), he said "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mat.6.19-21).

So Jews understood the concept of getting "interest" but they probably had no concept of how it occurred, except perhaps in some miraculous way – just as many people with a savings account today are still equally vague.

In those days of greater ignorance, the Emperor Nero managed to get away with the biggest bank heist in history. In 64 CE, he devalued Roman coinage by mixing in base metals. This netted him roughly 10% of the whole world's coinage, because as coins wore out and were gradually melted and replaced with ones wearing his face, he minted 10% more coins from the same metal. We know the exact date from analysing coins of the time. Others in later centuries copied his example, but never with such universal success, and very few people attributed the consequent inflation to Nero.

Jesus was not ignorant about money. About one fifth of his parables included a mention of monetary values and coins, such as finding dowry coins, discovering a buried hoard of money, paying coins to help the injured Samaritan, and payment for day labourers, the threat of debtors' prison, finding a valuable pearl, or two debtors who can't repay, (Luke 15:8-10; Mat.13.44; Luke.10.34; Mat.20.1-16; Mat.5.23-26;

13.45-46; 18.23-35). These stories and saying suggest that Jesus was not against money itself, but what he decried was *mammon*.

The normal term for money in Aramaic was *kesef* ('money' or 'silver'), but when 'money' had a negative connotation, they tended to use the term *mammon*. This distinction was important to them because they regarded money and wealth as a blessing from God, so they wanted a different word that they could use when money had to be distanced from God, and seen in a negative light. The gospel writers didn't have a Greek word that expressed 'money' in a negative light, so they simply transliterated the Aramaic word *mammon*.

Jews in Jesus' day distinguished between good money and bad. After all, wealthy people were made wealthy by God – so they didn't see anything intrinsically bad about wealth. And their wealth was a special form of interest, so there was nothing malign about this system that would later be castigated as 'capitalism'. But they did also recognised that there was 'bad' money, which they called *mammon.* Jesus referred to it in his Sermon on the Mount: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and *mammon* (RSV Mat.6.24//Luke.16.13).

In one famously difficult parable, Jesus praises a dishonest manager who is fired, so on his last day he ingratiates himself to his master's rich clients by reducing their invoices. Jesus doesn't praise this method of making friends by *mammon* but points out this man is wiser than religious people because they don't even bother to make eternal friends by *mammon*, let alone by pointing them in the right direction (Luke.16.1-9).

Luke is clearly fascinated by this term which he may have been new to him, coming from a Gentile background (according to Eusebius *History* 3.4 and Jerome *De Viris Illustribus* 7). He places Jesus' two other sayings about *mammon* immediately after this parable (v.11, 13) including one which isn't preserved elsewhere: "If then you have not

been faithful in the unrighteous *mammon*, who will entrust to you the true riches?" (RSV Luke 16.11). Luke adds the word "unrighteous" to describe *mammon* though Matthew, as usual, doesn't add any explanation, presumably because his readers are closer to Jesus' Jewish roots and already know the word.

Most of the extant rabbinic literature of Jesus' time consists of legal documents. In these, when talking about money in a negative way – such as paying fines or compensation – they tend to use the term *mammon*. The Shammaites (who only existed before 70 CE) refer to a woman's divorce compensation as *mammon* (m.Yeb.15.3). Another law uses *mammon* referring to 'compensation' for damages that accompany a guilt offering (t.Shebu.3.1) – and this must date back to Temple times when guilt offerings were still possible. A more moral usage is found when R Eleazar ben Azariah (a traditional rabbi in the last 1st century) argued against someone: "You are like one who maximises *mammon* but you are merely causing loss of life ['souls']" (m.Yad.4.3).

Very few records concerning matters of morality are preserved, but we do have the recorded words of Monobases, the king of Adiabene when he generously helped during famine in about 45 CE. He was publicly criticised by his relatives for giving away the family fortune, and he responded: "My ancestors stored up treasures below, but I have stored up [treasures] above… My ancestors stored up treasures of *mammon*, but I have stored up treasures of souls" (t.Peah.4.18). Of course this reply wasn't recorded till later, and we can't be sure of the actual wording, but this usage of *mammon* is consistent with the earliest witness which happens to be the Gospels.[2]

Unfortunately, it is translated "money" in some Bibles, which is entirely misleading. The NIV translates *mammon* as "worldly wealth" for two of the three occasions where Jesus refers to it (Luke.16.11,13). This gets

[2] By contrast, the Qumran sectarians used *mammon* when referring to their family wealth (CD 14:20; 1QS 6:2; 1Q27.2.5; 4Q299.2.1) but this may be because they consciously rejected this wealth when they joined the community.

close to the original meaning of this word. However, like almost all modern translations, it has translated Jesus' best-known saying as: You cannot serve God and money" (Mat.6.24//Luke.16.13). At that point, William Tyndale decided that, because the Gospel writers didn't translate this Aramaic word, but simply transliterated it, he'd do the same, hence: "Ye cannot serve God and *mammon*" which survived into the King James Bible along with 85% of his wording. This keeps the distinction that Jews and Jesus made between money which can be good and useful, and *mammon* which the wealth that can be bad.

Jesus was both for money and against it, and it isn't too difficult to distinguish between the two, and not only by his use of the word *mammon*. The person who didn't put his talents to work was castigated by Jesus who said he could at least have gained investment interest from the money (Matt.25:26-27; Luke.19.23) – which implies he wasn't against this use of money. However, he told a parable of a rich man in hell speaking to poor Lazarus in heaven (Luke 16.19-31) and he was scathing about the man who spent his whole life building warehouses for his worldly goods and then died without being able to take any with him (Luke 12.16-20). This was emphasised by the wonderful image of a camel going through the eye of a needle (Mat.19.24//Mark.10.25//Luke.18.25). This was adapted from the popular saying about the impossibility of an elephant going through the eye of a needle (b.Ber.55b; b.BM.38b) but by changing it to a camel, Jesus' hearers thought about those caravans of merchants and the rich with their entourage who tended to have several camels for haulage.

When Jesus met the rich young ruler, Jesus didn't despise him – it says he "loved him" (Mark.10.21). Jesus even offered to let him be a disciple: "follow me" – but only after he'd distributed his wealth to the poor (Mat.19.16-22//Mark.10.17-22//Luke.18.18-23). This is in contrast to Zacchaeus who offered to give away half his wealth and Jesus responded "Today salvation has come" (Luke.10.9). Jesus presumably saw that the rich young ruler had a different and corrupting

relationship to his wealth, and therefore made this difficult demand that he give up all of it.

The early church had rich members as well as poor. They could inadvertently cause difficulties when everyone met together – as at Corinth where it appears that people brought food for a communal meal but didn't necessarily share it (1Cor.11.20-22), or in James' church where the rich got the good seats – or perhaps the only seats (James.2.3). However, rich people also contributed to the church. Paul himself was helped by patrons such as Phoebe (Rom.16.1-2) and Philemon the owner of the slave Onesimus who (like many others) was thanked for hosting "the church in your house" (Philm.1.1). Right at the start, when the Jerusalem congregation was bulging with converted Jewish pilgrims who had come for the festival of Pentecost and had stayed when they heard about Jesus – they now needed support and many gave generously (Acts.4.32-37).

However, Acts and the epistles mirror Jesus teaching by also pointing out the dangers of money. Ananias and Sapphira pretended to be generous (Act.5.1-10). Both Paul and the author of Hebrews warn about the dangers of "the love of money" rather than regarding money itself as dangerous (1Tim.6.9-10; Heb.13.5) while James and Peter warn about the dangers of greed for wealth and luxury (James 5.1-6; 2 Peter 2.1-3, 14-15). Paul expressed this in terms that were most horrifying for Jews by comparing greed or covetousness (the longing to own more) to idolatry – the worst of all sins in the Bible (Col.3.5; Eph.5.5). This highlights Jesus' warning that we should not "serve" (i.e. "worship") money (i.e. *mammon*) instead of God.

The NT therefore has a nuanced and consistent message about money which was, at the time, new and somewhat poorly understood. The consistent teaching was that, like the rest of this world, it can be used for good - or for ill, especially when it is hoarded and loved.

On a final personal note, much of my wage bill as a Research Fellow was paid by Sir John Laing, who demonstrated an ideal way of following Jesus' teaching about money. He was a UK contractor who made a fortune building motorways and power stations. He lived simply, and carefully distributed his money to causes that benefited the

spread of the gospel in the most efficient ways. One of his beneficiaries was Tyndale House in Cambridge, where I worked – which transformed the academic world of Bible scholarship, often on a shoestring budget. One of my jobs there was to repair computers that broke down, at least twice, before replacing them, and he liked that kind of carefulness. When Sir John died, his executors found he had about £300 left in his account. According to Jesus, he'll have a treasure-house of friends in heaven.

Money and Christian Activism as Non-Negotiable Discipleship

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I argue in this paper that our relationship with our money is not neutral. Our economic footprint is related not only to our environmental footprint, but to our lived discipleship and espoused theology. Christians need not only act appropriately regarding their money, but repent, confess and reorientate their behaviour to subvert the neo-capitalist system that normalises violence and exploitation for economic gain.

I edited a special collection for the journal *Modern Believing* entitled: 'God and Mammon: Theological Challenges to our Monetary Culture.' Included in this special issue was an article by Eve Poole. Eve, controversially, wanted to direct attention away from 'righteous railing against the system' to instead focus on the actions of and to 'return agency to' the individual.[3] She argues that consumerism 'can have positive effects' as desire is God-given. We do not need to resist desire therefore, but should 'curve it away from mammon back towards God', realising the difference between finite desire and infinite desire.[4] She urges readers to 'challenge the power of mammon' through

[3] Eve Poole, 'How to defeat Mammon One Transaction at a Time,' *Modern Believing* 66.3, 2025, 223-231.
[4] Ibid, 228.

developing 'an obsession with monthly bank and credit card statements,' to try to consume ethically and locally.[5]

Eve presents desire as a 'birth-right' and wants to 'baptise desire'. She expands how dopamine and serotonin are involved when we consume to fulfil social belonging.[6] The biological involvement of desire leads her to think it is a wrong conclusion that some anti-capitalists reach by desiring to turn-off desire. She gives an example of a colleague bumping into another colleague at Tesco and them replying ashamed that they usually shop at Waitrose, yet does not offer a class analysis here.[7] Furthermore, Eve does not question who has choice and who does not. Beyond choosing our favourite supermarkets, the ethics of credit card debt are not discussed, nor is the cost-of-living crisis that has plunged four million people into a negative budget—i.e. not even able to fund the essentials.[8] A desire for class status, power or privilege is not neutral. I find it difficult to 'baptise desire' for material things when this desire for "fitting-in" or "being-like-everyone-else" is actively harming the planet and exploiting others.

In this article, I want to argue that our desire (even the desire in the finite) needs to be redirected. To direct desire towards God we need not only review our bank statements but review our interconnectedness. Wren Radford, writing about attentiveness and connection in practical theology writes how it is in this 'entangling where both the otherness-of-others and the divine are encountered.'[9] She also warns how entanglement can too easily be seen as a beautiful word. She cautions us to take notice of power relations in our theology, paying attention to the 'legacies of colonialism [...], class, race, global

[5] Ibid, 228-229.
[6] Ibid, 227.
[7] Ibid, 227.
[8] Citizens Advice, Four million people in the red and half a million more 'on the cusp of crisis' warns Citizens Advice, 2025, accessed via Four million people in the red and half a million more 'on the cusp of crisis' warns Citizens Advice - Citizens Advice.
[9] Wren Radford, 'Theology in the Making' in Doug Gay, Alison Jasper and David Jasper eds., *Theology Through Creative Practice: Engagements with the Work of Heather Walton* (Sacristy Press, 2025), 65-95, 76.

location, disability, gender, sexuality that influence our daily encounters with one another.'[10] I posit that we need to pay attention to power relations and connections when reviewing how we live out our espoused theology in the world too. We cannot understand our own economic footprint in isolation as if the way we live only impacts ourselves and our immediate social circle.

My own article in this special issue of *Modern Believing* focused on the Iona Community's Economic Witness. The Economic witness forms one part of the five-part Rule of the Iona Community. This shared five-fold Rule unites the membership in a common witness and is formed of:

1. Daily prayer and Bible-reading
2. Sharing and accounting for the use of our resources, including money
3. Planning and accounting for the use of our time
4. Action for justice and peace in society and the integrity of creation
5. Meeting with and accounting to each other

I pick up an article published in the *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* that explores the Economic Witness of the Community. The authors, academics in the business departments of universities in Cardiff and Melbourne, generally hold the Economic Witness in high regard, realising that shared disciplines have the potential for 'new kinds of collective action', but they also warn that they can function as 'forms of domination.'[11] My article argues that it is the other elements of the five-fold Rule that hold this risk to account. For instance, accounting for the use of time along with money, and doing this together can highlight disparities in wage earning, revealing the gender pay gap, and also has the potential to highlight reproductive (invisible) labour generally undertaken by women in the

[10] Ibid.
[11] Kerry Jacobs and Stephen P. Walker (2004) 'Accounting and Accountability in the Iona Community', *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal,* 17(3), 361–8, 379.

home. Secondly, having the economic witness alongside action for justice and peace in society and the integrity of creation (along with the discipline of prayer and worship) provides a larger vision for how our economic footprint relates to the wider world.[12] Isolating our own bank accounts and restricting our wealth as private knowledge and personal responsibility pretends as if we are powerless. It strips us of the power of solidarity, protest and radical change that is possible through collective movements towards justice.

As Joerg Rieger points out, capitalism shapes not only the economy, but also our political, religious and theological imagination at the deepest levels.[13]

Individualism is an illusion that is simply not an option in a world that is as interconnected as ours. The myths of individualism and of individual solutions amount to cover-ups of existing relationships [...] any real solution, whether economic, political, or religious, will need to engage structural relationships at every level and take into account the flows of power.[14]

The choices that we personally make as consumers are only a small part of the web of production and exploitation. Our economic footprint is entangled in global relationships of power, through not only what we buy, but also where we invest and what/where we give. One area where we, as Christians invest our money and build collective wealth, and therefore collective power, is our churches.

Our churches, when committed together in the ecumenical movement have the potential to join their influence and power in society and the economy. The British Council of Churches was formed in 1942, with a memorable speech by William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, urging the public to keep unity as a priority, especially

[12] Victoria Turner, 'Accountability and Economic Witness in the Iona Community,' *Modern Believing* 66.3, 2025.
[13] Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitolocene: Ecology, Identity, Class and Solidarity* (Fortress Press, 2022), 208.
[14] Rieger, *Theology in the Capitolocene,* 6-7.

during times of division (war). At the outset, the BCC created a Department of Social Responsibility, made up of church representatives and specialist members selected by the Council. It's first work was considering post-war reconstruction, with tasks such as reviewing the famous Beveridge Report (which it approved enthusiastically), industrial workers' rights and economic justice—especially following on from the 1937 ecumenical Oxford Conference on Life and Work which declared the economic systems unjust.[15] The Department's concern of industry was extended to "overseas workers" from 1954. The Department minutes of 1954 record concerns with housing and that overseas workers help be integrated into communities. They also noted that 'West African and West Indian Christians do not feel at home in our services', yet quickly countering this statement with 'being used to a much more emotional and fundamental type.'[16]

The 'Consultative Committee on Overseas Coloured Workers' was created in 1955, their terms of reference being the 'social material and spiritual welfare' of primarily migrant workers. The Committee was disbanded after 3.5 years after having decided there was not enough work to justify it.[17] It was reborn (albeit under a different name) in the early 1970's as discussion on the need to tackle racism in the UK (principally England and with that London and Birmingham) overwhelmed the department's agendas. The new Community and Race Relations Unit was tasked with combating racism, highly influenced by the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism programme. David Haslam, who was its Secretary from 1987 described its work as 'the development of good community relations by offering grants to local projects, educating the churches, and

[15] 'Minutes of the BCC Social Responsibility Department, 1942-1956', *Lambeth Palace Library Archives,* BCC/SRD/2/1/1.
[16] Ibid. I have avoided using the terminology "Coloured Workers" in the body of the text, but this was the phrase used to describe British citizens who had emigrated from the Caribbean and India to help with Britain's lack of available workers.
[17] 'Minute 20 June, 1958'. Ibid.

monitoring legislation as it affected minority communities.'[18] (The most enduring of these is probably the Sanctuary movement, where churches would shelter people threatened with deportation, the initiative has since been spearheaded by Inderjit Bhopal).[19] He also noted that Christian Aid gave the Unit £40,000 a year in grants (a very substantial sum then).[20]

The grants exemplify a kind of self-less giving on behalf of the Christian churches committed to one another in the British Council of Churches. The grant criteria did not ask for the applicants to demonstrate how their projects would benefit any church. The criteria were:

1. Does the project combat racism?
2. Does the project alleviate the effect of racism?
3. Is the project responding to a need which has been articulated by the local community?
4. Does the organisation have personnel and a structure which are relevant and appropriate to its purpose?
5. Are the local churches and the project willing to develop mutually supportive links?
6. Has the project fully explored other sources of support?
7. Does the project assist in the conscientisation[21] of those involved and of the wider community?

Point number 5 was not an exclusive need. Many of the projects funded did not have links with local churches. This was selfless giving. It was giving for justice in the context of which the church is a part, but it did not presume that the church was the answer. And, crucially, the

[18] David Haslam, *A Luta Continua (The Struggle Continues): Memoir of a Sometimes Radical Christian* (Resource Publications, 2016), 54.
[19] The City Of Sanctuary Movement | Rev. Dr. Inderjit Bhogal OBE
[20] Haslam, *A Luta Continua,* 54-55.
[21] This is taken from the Brazilian liberation theologian and educator Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), to describe how people can be awakened to their real situations of living in poverty and feel empowered to change their circumstances (it also relates to those with privilege being awakened to their complicity).

people who administered the grants, were chosen for their specialism in advocating for this work, whether as chaplains or working in the community. Grants were given to bring life in its fullness to those marginalised by the system. The grants given in the July meeting of 1985 for instance were: £1000 to the Blackburn Chinese School for language tuition, the Caribbean Development Foundation in Hackney were given £1000 to further develop their black led project that trained people in hairdressing and fashion, £300 was given to group of young (none older than 24) black parents in Lewisham for an "All-Dayer" event for local children in a park that they envisioned continuing as youth work, £1500 to a community theatre group in Manchester to produce an anti-racist video, £3500 to Searchlight, a monthly journal that monitored the activities of the far right, £3500 to support an Ashram project in Sparkbrook, Birmingham— a women's only house that specialised in traditional Asian embroidery, and £2000 towards Roscoe Methodist Church in Leeds for their Family Counselling service for people from the Caribbean. Some of the requests that were refused included Scripture Union, Save the Children, and Merton Community Council. Churches or large organisations were not prioritised.[22] Indeed, a body made up of the churches saw a deficit and humbled itself to meet it, not directing the answer, but empowering the grassroots in their already ongoing work. A beautiful example of the *missio Dei* in practice.

Gustavo Guiterrez, one of the founders of liberation theology in 1971 pushed for the need for solidarity, rather than charity, with his challenge on who needs liberation. He discusses the need for 'self-liberation', to really comprehend the liberating process, in that what is needed is not for Christians to "struggle for others" in a paternalistic, removed or even objective fashion, but to see our entanglements. We have to 'become aware of oneself as… living in an alienated society', a separation of 'sin' of one divides personal salvation from Christ's

[22] Community and Race Relations Unit, 'Schedule of Grants, 15 July 1985', (BCC/CRRU/21/0B).

sacrifice being for the whole human community.[23] The church cannot flourish in a nation that does not take racial justice seriously. The Unit worked to not prioritise God's mission as it would immediately benefit the church, or members of the church, but prioritise God's justice in local communities, not by the church's direction but by the church using its resources to empower local people towards self-liberation.

It is not that the church, being blessed with steady finances, should simply act graciously as in the first example with the CCU grants, but we also have to contend with the reality that our money is caught up in the sinful structures that led Jesus to the cross. We have a duty to rebuke, disobey and reorientate the system. We tend to presume innocence when we consider our nation's, and our ecclesial wealth. Our institutions, however, have not been neutrally blessed with money from God, but have inherited and invested money from various avenues. Of course, the obvious problematic example being the transatlantic slave trade. 'Over 10 million Africans were stolen from their homes and forcefully transported to the Caribbean as the enslaved chattel and property of Europeans'.[24] The transatlantic slave trade is the largest forced migration in human history, with no parallel to the inhumane conditions facing enslaved persons. The Church was not only caught up in, but profited and benefited from the trading of persons. The Church Commissioners (CoE) found investments in the 18th Century to the South Sea Company, which is known to have transported over 34,000 enslaved persons across the Atlantic alongside receiving donation from salve-owning figures such as Edward Colston.[25] University College London's 'Legacies of British Slavery' project shows that as of 1836 the SPG (today's USPG connected to the Church of

[23] Gustavo Gutierrez, A *Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 146.
[24] Caricom (2013) 'CARICOM Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice,' https://caricom.org/caricom-ten-point-plan-for-reparatory-justice/#:~:text=Over%2010%20million%20Africans%20were,of%20man's%20inhumanity%20to%20man.
[25] Grant Thornton, 'Investigating the Church's links to the Slave Trade,' (2023) https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/insights/investigating-the-churchs-links-to-slavery/

England the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church in Wales) owned 410 enslaved people and received compensation of £8500 after abolition.[26] A complex narrative extends even to the Evangelical networks and missionary societies, known for abolition campaigns such as the Baptist Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and London Missionary Society. Original missions to the Caribbean were accompanied with commands to not become involved in the politics of slave-owning, but to educate the enslaved people in their present conditions. Similarly, at home, investments into the slave trade by those in Evangelical Networks were not necessarily avoided for theological concerns (there was in reality divided opinion on the question), but because of sociological conditions where non-conformists tended to be of lower classes in society.[27] Further, prominent individuals and donors to these networks, such as George Whitefield and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (attached to today's Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Congregational churches—Congregation Federation and United Reformed Church), themselves owned and bought people to work on their estates in the Southern States of America. Furthermore, the legacy of slavery can be seen in church buildings across England and Scotland through private donations coming from plantation owners (examples include Wells Cathedral and Glasgow Cathedral, and St Peter's in Dorchester, Dorset).

Our churches financed the forced transportation and enslavement of millions of people from Africa, and bear the wounds in our faulty theologies that still have not fully reckoned with this violence, our investment funds, and our architecture. For contemporary work on the questions of reparations I would point you to Robert Beckford,[28] Colin

[26] Bodleian Online, 'Codrington Plantation.' http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/exhibition/uspg/collections/show/3
[27] Brian Stanley (2007) 'Baptists, Anti-Slavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', *Baptist Quarterly* 42 (4), 284-95.
[28] Robert Beckford, 'Where Do We Go From Here,' The Inaugural Robert Beckford Lecture, Queens Foundation, 2025, The Queen's Foundation: The Inaugural Robert Beckford Lecture

Cowan[29] and Carlton Turner.[30] That the churches received money from either their own investments from the slave trade, or donations from church members, at the time was also not taken for granted as a "normal" part of contemporary life. Abolitionists fiercely challenged the involvement of the churches, and the profiting from the transatlantic slave trade.

Even after the Slavery Abolitions Act (1833), British churches still actively benefited from the slave trade (apart from also benefitting from government paid compensation). One example was the newly established Free Church of Scotland (1843) which posed itself as the "true" Scottish Presbyterian church, being free from State and landed gentry control and coercion. They used this argument to drum up support from the Presbyterian churches in the US to finance their building of new, alternative churches in Scotland, and their missionary efforts. A campaign grew from within the church, asking it to "Send Back the Money" calling money from the slave owning States "Blood Money" which they should not accept. Frederick Douglass even toured Scotland to teach about the horrors of US slavery and encourage the Scottish churches to send the money back. This question about money brought about ecclesiological and theological questions about fellowship with a sister denomination that was committing 'heresy' as most members of the Free Church understood the crime of slavery to be, as slavery by members of these churches was being justified on theological grounds. The campaign did not achieve any physical results, but it did create a public outrage and cry. The irony of the Free Church accepting money that resulted from people being kept in bondage did not escape rebuke from many members.[31]

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[29] Colin Cowan at the WCRC 2025 General Council, TB_Response2_DisorderingOrders_ENGLISH.pdf.
[30] Carlton Turner, 'Wealth extraction/wealth distraction: thinking theologically about reparations,' *Practical Theology* (Vol. 18, 4, 2025), 343-357.
[31] An excellent account of this history can be found in Iain Whyte, *Send Back the Money!: The Free Church of Scotland and American Slavery* (James Clarke & Co, 2012).

As a Reformed Christian I belong to a communion that has confessed their sin regarding the accumulation of money in the Accra Confession which states:

> We acknowledge the complicity and guilt of those who consciously or unconsciously benefit from the current neoliberal economic global system; we recognise that this includes churches… and therefore we call for confession of sin.[32]

Accra is a prophetic challenge that confronts Western privilege holders with their complicity. In some sense, my church has made some steps to listen and act. The United Reformed Church divested in 2019 from fossil fuels from our General Assembly funds and since then every Synod of the church has also divested and individual churches have been pushed to do so. The call for divestment came from the URC Youth Assembly and the youth used the Accra Confession to push the church towards this. Similarly young people joined the call to push the URC to divest from Israeli settlements, and since the 2024 General Assembly, is working on divesting from Israel all-together until it abides by international law. As good as these moves are, however, the result has been celebration for the actions of divesting, rather than a realization and a 'repentance' as called for by Accra for investing in Empire in the first place.

As Miroslav Volf points out, the hope of the resurrection cannot be divorced from the cross, or more accurately, the 'active opposition' of Jesus to the kingdom of 'deception and oppression' that led him to the cross. 'There can be no redemption unless the truth about the world is told, and justice is done. To treat sin as if it were not there, when in fact it is there, accounts to living as if the world were redeemed, when it is not.[33] We cannot continue to pretend that we are neutral players in our current economic systems, or that structures that praise greed and which function through the exploitation of others and the planet can

[32] Accra Confession, 2004. About the Accra Confession - WCRC
[33] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abington, 1996), 293-4.

be redeemed. The revealing of the true nature of things is a prophetic act, as explained by Walter Brueggeman:

Empires live by numbness. Empires, in their militarism, expect numbness about the human cost of war. Corporate economies expect blindness to the cost in terms of poverty and exploitation. [...] Jesus penetrates the numbness by his compassion and with his compassion takes the first step by making visible the odd abnormality that had become business as usual. Thus compassion that might be seen simply as generous goodwill is in fact criticism of the system, forces, and ideologies that produce the hurt. Jesus enters into the hurt and finally comes to embody it.[34]

Last year more than 200,000 children were referred to the National Health Service in the UK for anxiety. Young people are crippled by anxiety, depression, climate anxiety and stress. The precarity of life is making selfishness not only normal, but presumed to be necessary. "I'm doing everything that they're telling me to do, but I am still choosing whether I heat my home or feed my kids." This was a recent quote from someone living with poverty as part of the Let's End Poverty Campaign, quoted at the Iona Community Lecture that called for a just economy.[35] Young people are living with constant anxiety under capitalism, with the constant reminder from their smart phones to have a side-hussle, to exploit their friends, to take a bath that will fix all their problems, we might expect to be numb to suffering elsewhere in the world. I think some of us, and sometimes all of us, are. Yet at the same time the millions marching in London was made up of mostly young people. Young people put their degrees at risk when they are protesting against the genocide in Gaza in their universities. Children are missing school and protesting for their governments to take notice of the climate emergency. In retaliation young people are called naive, as if "we don't know the complexity of the problem."

[34] Bruggeman, 88-89.
[35] Simeon Mitchell, 'Turning the Tables,' *Iona Community Lecture, 2024*. Turning the Tables. The Iona Community Learn Lecture 2024

With the solutions often being in the area of self-help, where even religion is commodified to work and speak only to the individual and where it can be bent and twisted endlessly to meet their particular needs, self-help won't help. Of course, this goes to the extreme with characters like Russell Brand under the Andrew Tate brand, twisting religion to promote their wealth and toxic masculinity, or explicitly with Donald Trump twisting Christianity to suit his nationalistic geo-political violence (with the assistance of AI). The church is also complicit in "self-help" with wealthy church circles wrapped up in capitalist models to increase their congregations, their donations, their bums on seats and pulling away from co-operation and any risk taking that might hurt their position. The Accra Confession has the line "We acknowledge that we have become captivated by the culture of consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the current economic system. This has all too often permeated our very spirituality." We need communal resistance to heal us.

A *status confessionis*, the Accra Confession being one, demonstrates a time of cognitive dissonance. Where we notice that the status quo in which we live as churches in communion makes it unviable for us as churches to live faithfully to the Gospel, the work of the Holy Spirit in the World and the model and teachings of Jesus. Churches that celebrate the economic systems and exploit the world belonging to us all, and other peoples that belong to God's earth, were called as following idolatry and heresy, not the God of justice and peace. Jesus asks us to deny ourselves and follow him (Luke 9:23). This calls for a particular kind of solidarity that releases us from the pressure of capitalism's limited individual idea of anthropocentric worth that places the responsibility of the world on our own shoulders (or bank accounts). Denying ourselves for Christ is not to give up and bend to the coercive pressures of the dominant system, but to have our eyes opened to our privileges in that system and use them for the conscientization of all.

Minutes of 2026 AGM

26th March 2026 – Held Online via Zoom

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

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING Copies of the minutes of the previous AGM held 10th April 2025 were available on the website. These were approved as a correct record and signed by the chairman.

ELECTION The meeting agreed to the election or re-election of the following:

a) **President** – Professor David Wilkinson

b) **Vice-Presidents** - Prof. Malcolm A. Jeeves, Prof. Sir Colin J. Humphries and Revd Dr John Weaver as Vice Presidents.

c) **Honorary Treasurer** – Dr David Watkis

d) **Council -** Rev. Bob Allaway (Chair) , Rev. John Buxton, Mrs Joanne Mead, Rev. Dr Sally Nelson, Rev. Dr David Instone-Brewer and Dr David E. Watkis and Dr Todd Kantchev (ex officio Reviews Editor for S&CB).

e) The meeting noted the resignation from Council of Dr Alan Kerry.

ANNUAL ACCOUNTS The completed 2025 annual accounts have been independently examined and were presented. The independent examiner found a discrepancy in the starting figure and the accounts amounting to £55.70. This was tracked down to an error in recording PayPal payments – three payments in March 2023 had been entered twice in error. The accounts have been corrected and the independent examiner has approved the corrected version.

DW pointed out that the independent examiner is married to a council member and this interest has been declared.

The year-end shows a deficit of £2907 after paying outstanding expenses from 2024 symposium but the reserves remain strong.

The corrected end of year cash balance was £5120.72 and share valuations totalled £138,806.

We have made some changes to share-holdings in the current year, shifting our portfolio away from fossil fuel companies and towards more ethically sustainable investments. Our share manager advised transferring some funds to gilts which we have done.

The current financial situation is satisfactory, with balances of £9766.22 (bank account) and £131,140.48 (investments). The budget for 2026 will depend on the decision taken under future plans below.

DIB asked if we planned to continue to have the accounts independently examined as this is not a legal requirement for our level of income. DW replied that this was being done for probity, but may not be necessary if future finances simplify significantly along the lines of the proposal below.

RA said that the 'Gunning Prize Fund' money had been identified by Simon Buck as having derived in part from the proceeds of enslavement in Brazil. AK said this was correct, the former treasurer had advised him that the Charity Commission required the name of the original donor to appear in the annual accounts. AK suggested that Council might consider what action should be taken in light of this discovery, but an option might be to find a suitable Brazilian theological college and encourage their students to apply for academic grants from F&T?

FUTURE PLANS FOR F&T – A Proposal to discontinue the subscription model of membership and move to publishing the journal online. The full proposal had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

This was discussed, DIB said that free open online publishing is increasingly the gold standard that academic journals are moving towards anyway, so this is not a matter of necessity but preference. DW agreed but also pointed out that we are currently making a loss on producing the paper journal.

John Hodges asked if future papers would be published in the form of a periodic volume or as individual papers. DIB said either option would be acceptable for an 'online journal', this need not necessarily be published 'periodically' with a volume number. He said that one off papers stood a better chance of actually being read. JH asked about reference identification. DIB said increasingly online papers are identified by DOI number rather than volume and page numbers.

Andy Dipper said he thought making the papers available for free online was brilliant but would authors be happy? AK said that our current arrangements make it clear that our constitution states 'Papers presented to the Society shall be considered as the property of the Society unless there shall have been any previous engagement with its author to the contrary, and the Council may cause the same to be published in any way and at any time it may think proper.'

AK mentioned that the question of administration roles after he leaves are still open and we have been in conversation with two individuals about this. When we know what help might be available the future plans (events, frequency of publication etc) would be clearer. JW said that if the person he has been in contact with was willing to help this would be greatly to our benefit.

RA asked if the April journal would still be published and AK confirmed this would be a paper journal that is nearly finalised. It will be accompanied by a letter to all members advising them of this decision and asking them to CANCEL their subscription. Any uncancelled subscriptions or other money coming in after the journal has been sent out will be regarded as a donation towards the work of Faith & Thought.

AK raised the question of what might happen with S&CB book reviews, which are currently published in the paper version of F&T. Council will need to negotiate with Christians in Science on this matter if they wish to continue to publish the book reviews.

The chairman invited the meeting to vote on the proposal and this was carried unanimously.

CLOSE The Chairman closed the meeting by leading those present in saying the grace together.

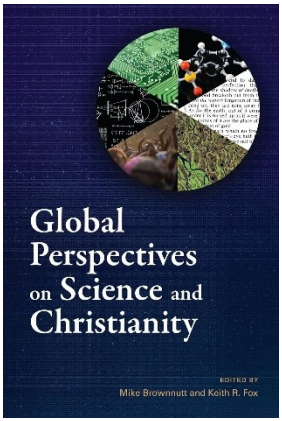
Book Reviews

The following book reviews appear in Science and Christian Belief and are re-printed here with kind permission of Christians in Science for the benefit of our members who have not signed up for online access to that journal.

Mike Brownnutt and Keith R. Fox (Ed)
Global Perspectives on Science and Christianity
Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2024. 278 pp. pb. £19.99. ISBN 9781839739880

Different places are different. That is a refrain which resounds through this anthology of perspectives from around the world on how science fits within the Christian faith. Some aspects of science are independent of cultural context. The speed of light is the same in every country on earth, anywhere else in the universe for that matter, and Maxwell's equations are the same for everyone. But the reception of Darwin's theory of evolution varied greatly as its interpretation became weaponised for a variety of political, ethical, and religious (and anti-religious) purposes. Some aspects of Christianity are almost universally

accepted: that God became humanly embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, and that he died for us and rose again so that we might enjoy eternal life. But other aspects are highly culturally dependent, such as how to express Christian faith in contexts rich in indigenous knowledge.



It is therefore highly appropriate that the Foreword has been contributed by the geographer and scholar of contextual reception of knowledge, David Livingstone. His book *Putting Science in its Place* does what the clever title says. His Foreword summarises the agenda for the book, albeit through the clunky neologism *Glocal* (the first OED occurrence is 1983). Not only are science and Christianity simultaneously global and local, so is the relationship between them. This theme becomes a full overture in the opening chapter by Mike Brownnutt, writing from the University of Hong Kong. In a culinary pair of metaphors, he writes how the engagement of Christianity with science is less like a Big Mac (the same everywhere in the world if the franchise is operating effectively), and more like cooked rice (with differing flavours and textures according to local varieties and styles of preparation). He illustrates this with differing attitudes to vaccination during the pandemic, which led to many lives saved but also a regrettable number of unnecessary deaths—over 1 million globally and 280,000 in the USA alone, with some of those attributable to church affiliations and rather more correlating with political affiliations.

There then follow a series of chapters each coming from a different cultural perspective, and each addressing a different kind of topic. Andrew Halestrap, Keith Fox, and Paul Ewart write about the history and future of Christians in Science. This began as the Research

Scientists Christian Fellowship, and was a think tank for many of the most distinguished scientists of faith in the UK to work through issues in incorporating their science within their Christianity. Under Dr Oliver Barclay it developed into a training ground for the next generation of scientists who could write and speak about their faith. It then found a further mission in outreach to undergraduate students. CiS now serves as a network providing resources for scientists and churches and encouraging informed debate. Much of the chapter describes the joys and frustrations of sustainable funding for the endeavour.
Mike Brownnutt then offers an Asian perspective on the blurred boundaries between science and religion. Peter Harrison has long since elucidated how recent is the current Western understanding of the territories of science and religion ('Imagine that an academic colleague told you that he had discovered a contemporary 16th century account of a war between Egypt and Israel …'). To some extent Western science thrived on a perceived dichotomy of the natural and the supernatural. This distinction does not apply in the same way in cultures where enchantment is basic and appeal to mechanism may be met with incomprehension.

Guilherme de Carvalho gives an account of the Brazilian Association of Christians in Science, for which the Portuguese acronym is ABC^2. This was founded in 2016, and adopted the text over the entrance of the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, "*The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein*" (Ps. 111:2). ABC^2 has grown spectacularly ever since, with strong leadership and a systematic programme for training leaders in each city where a new hub is launched. He emphasises the social dimension, and the need for communication between scientific and religious social fields.
Kostos Tampakis and Efthymios Nicolaidis give an illuminating history of 150 years of Greek Orthodox apologetics and the challenge of Darwinism, thereby illustrating the contextuality of science and its reception. Their project Science and Orthodoxy around the World

(SOW) is a remarkable example of science engagement beyond Protestantism.

Bernard Boyo, Samuel Karenga, and Peter Kirira, who have been leading figures in the Christian & Scientific Association of Kenya, emphasise the significance of the wholeness of human life for the African person, as exemplified by the concept of *ubuntu*.
Most of the organisations whose members contributed to this book were started by scientists of faith. Many of them were funded by Templeton World Charity Foundation, largely (except for SOW) within the initiative *Internationalising Christians in Science*. Scientists in different parts of the world were eager to think through how their science belonged within their faith, and to invite others to join them in the journey. Other scientists, not necessarily with any faith commitment, are now realising the importance of engaging with religious systems of knowledge in order to tackle the big problems facing humanity, with a concomitant need to trust in science within its legitimate bounds.

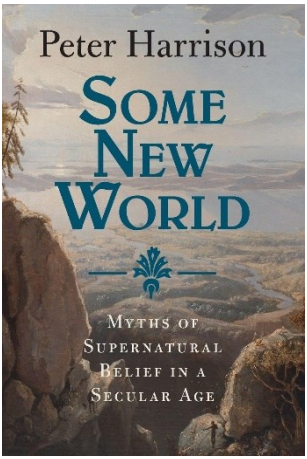
The enthusiasm of scientists to engage constructively with faith is increasingly matched by a growing awareness of faith leaders that if the church is here to serve a world shaped by science and technology, then as influencers they need to engage with science. An example of this is the Anglican Communion Science Commission (ACSC). ACSC is not denominational for its own sake (far from it), but is scalable through the glocal church network which has taken 200 years or more to build. The vision of ACSC is for confident and courageous leadership in matters involving science, drawing on science as a God-given resource for the life of faith and the work of the Church, and offering the wisdom of faith and the voice of the Church to science policy and the use of technologies arising from science. Church-led initiatives such as ACSC can learn much from the scientist-led initiatives described in *Global Perspectives*, because there is a strong alignment of principles of engagement. Some issues are global, such as climate change, health

care, and AI, but how they manifest themselves and how church communities can best engage are locally specific.
A commissioner of ACSC, Archbishop Linda Nichols, writes on the cover, 'This book sacrifices neither the integrity of Christian faith nor science and invites a continuous dialogue that is essential to human dignity, harmony with creation, and our relationship with God.' There are useful appendices with an extensive list of organisations and institutions around the world and a list of relevant journals. Before the appendices, in the final chapter Mike Brownnutt does his best to bring together common threads from the different contributions. I would love to see this expanded. In some ways *Global Perspectives* reads like a laboratory notebook, with many valuable observations waiting to be brought together into organised knowledge. Perhaps he will be inspired to do that next. Meanwhile *Global Perspectives* provides a rich resource of glocal experience and thinking.

Andrew Briggs is Professor Emeritus of Nanomaterials, University of Oxford and author of *The Penultimate Curiosity*, *It Keeps Me Seeking*, and *Human Flourishing* (all OUP).

Peter Harrison
Some New World: Myths of Supernatural Belief in a Secular Age
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 467 pp. hb £35. ISBN 9781009477222

This book seeks to answer the questions: at what point in Western history did people begin to speak about 'the supernatural'? and at what point did the associated term 'belief' take on its modern meaning? (vii). Most importantly, Harrison's goal is to better understand secular modernity (viii). This book builds on his earlier study *The Territories of Science and Religion* (2015, University of Chicago Press), where he looked at the historical development of the terms 'science' and 'religion'. Clearly all these terms are interrelated, as are their changes in meaning over time.



Harrison does a masterful job of tracing the development of these terms, showing their origins and original meanings in Christian theological discussions. For example, the term 'belief" for a long period in Christian history essentially meant trust but, over time and in part due to the influence of the Reformation, came to mean assent to a set of propositional beliefs for which there is good evidence. Based on this understanding it was possible for naturalists to dismiss 'the supernatural' as lacking credible evidence (*à la* Hume – though Harrison points out some of the problems with Hume's arguments regarding miracles – in fact the title of the book is taken from Hume).

In today's science and religion debates the modern understanding of these terms is read back into the past to support the views that many proponents of naturalism espouse. This has led to the perception, common in the West, that scientific naturalism has always been at odds with religious supernaturalism, a perception that is incorrect as this book shows. Conveniently forgotten (due to nineteenth century 'amnesia'; 238) is the point that the idea of the laws of nature, basic to naturalism, has theological origins (331), and that many of the great scientists (for example: Kepler, Galileo, Boyle, Faraday, Maxwell) were themselves Christian believers (343). Indeed, without the theologically based starting point that the world is intelligible and governed by a uniformity (367) that allow it to be described by laws (because there is a lawgiver; 228), naturalism would not have developed as it has.

An interesting observation made by Harrison is that the modern myth of progress, which has been used to support the argument that scientific naturalism has replaced religious supernaturalism in our

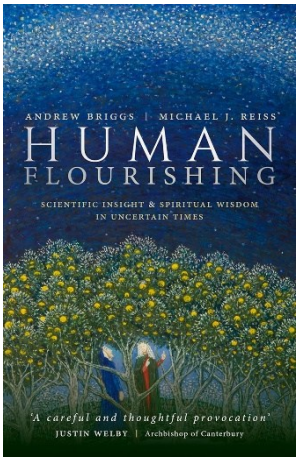
understanding of the world (nature), is itself simply a repackaged theology of providence or eschatology in a secular disguise (4). Indeed 'The natural sciences … might be thought of as a Christian heresy.' (367). This chimes with the point made by Tom Holland (author of *Dominion*) in his 2022 Theos Annual Lecture 'Humanism: a Christian Heresy' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYGQ6FIFLps). Both humanists and scientific naturalists have forgotten, or choose to ignore, the Christian theological basis underlying their beliefs.

The end result is that this book shows how odd a belief Western naturalism is compared with what most of the rest of the world believes and with what our forebears in the West also believed. As Harrison notes 'the dawn of a secular age and the rise of a naturalistic outlook is something of a historical aberration.' (3). A view, naturalism, that is taken for granted in our secular society, is in fact less than obvious and its basis in the split between 'the natural' and 'the supernatural' is in fact most unnatural.

This book might be considered Harrison's *magnum opus*, distilling much of his erudition and his studies over many years. It achieves its goal in providing a better understanding of the secular modernity of the Western world and how it arose, and I have no hesitation in recommending it to readers of this journal.

Prof. Meric Srokosz is an emeritus fellow at the National Oceanography Centre, Southampton, a former associate director of the Faraday Institute, Cambridge, and the author with Rebecca Watson of *Blue Planet, Blue God: the Bible and the Sea*.

Andrew Briggs and Michael J. Reiss
Human Flourishing: Scientific Insight & Spiritual Wisdom in Uncertain Times
Oxford: OUP, 2021. 352 pp. hb. £24.47. ISBN 9780198850267



This book is an output from a Templeton World Charity Foundation project on the science of human flourishing which ran from 2015 to 2018. The aim of the authors (who I'm sure need no introduction to the readers of *S&CB*) is to show how the promotion of human flourishing requires a combination of scientific insight and spiritual wisdom (vii). Their overall argument is that human flourishing is best described as the satisfaction of needs and yearnings across three separate, but intertwined, dimensions: the material, the relational, and the transcendent (4). Although they distance themselves from any religious apologetic objective (314), their hope is that the book might enable readers to clarify what they want from their lives and the lives of others, and even to help some readers lead more flourishing lives (3). With such goals in mind, the authors write in a clear, balanced, and non-technical way, requiring of the reader little prior scientific or theological expertise. Particularly helpful in a book covering such a broad topic, is the way it is structured and signposted. Three opening chapters on the three dimensions of human flourishing are followed by three more on the supporting 'pillars' of truth, purpose, and meaning. A further three chapters are then devoted to exemplifying how flourishing is challenged by the changing contexts afforded by: (1) the unpredictability of life; (2) the changing patterns of religious commitment; and (3) the accelerating pace of technological innovation. The capstone of the book is a final chapter on how human flourishing is ultimately fuelled by love.

With regard to content, the book is a cornucopia of fascinating facts, figures, case studies, and anecdotes taken from fields as diverse as physics, biology, psychology, education, sociology, philosophy, and theology, all of which reflects the impressive polymathic credentials of the authors. For example, we are told about the effects of wealth (30), wealth inequality (48), marriage (64), and religiosity (269) on human well-being; the special 'reverie' that can exist between mother and baby (7); near-death (94) and other transcendent experiences (87); 'reading wars' as an example of the difficulty of establishing truth in education (129); and much more. While some topics will already be familiar to those interested in the field of science and religion, the sheer breadth of scholarship is such that there is likely to be something new for all readers.

With regard to argument, the authors make some good points along the way to their ultimate conclusion that love is the source of all flourishing. For example, they point out: that our understanding of well-being can co-evolve with measurements of well-being (45); that evolutionary explanations of flourishing (e.g. in terms of gene propagation or endorphin release) need not preclude other more metaphysical or theological explanations (8); that transcendence goes beyond religious institutions and ceremonies (103); that truth is dependent on the observer insofar as it depends on what is sought (119); and that meaning can be chosen or created but ideally needs to be grounded externally (178).

In being so cautious and balanced to appeal to a wide readership, it is perhaps inevitable that there should be some questions left unanswered or unaddressed. From the perspective of Christian theology, more might have been said about the ultimate ontological grounding of all flourishing, truth, purpose, and meaning in Jesus Christ, the *Logos* of all creation, and the ultimate image or standard into whom we are to be transformed. From the perspective of philosophy, more might have been said to differentiate truth from

belief and knowledge, or to explain what is the meaning of 'meaning.' I was also not convinced by Chapter 8 on the limits to predictability inasmuch as for most people, the scientific advances mentioned in this chapter have arguably made little difference to their context of flourishing—if anything, general relativity (through improved GPS navigation), chaos theory (through improved weather forecasting), and evolutionary psychology (through greater awareness of some deep-seated human predilections) have *increased*, rather than decreased, life's predictability and comprehensibility compared to that of our forebears.

That said, the authors have done an excellent job at pitching their argument at a level that is fascinating, provocative, yet inoffensive to people of all faiths or none. I highly recommend the book. Indeed, for me, the reading of it was itself a flourishing experience!

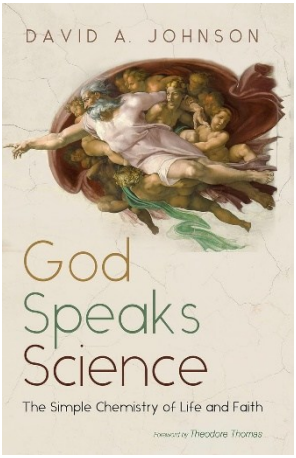
Andrew Jackson is a Research Associate at St Edmund's College Cambridge, an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham, and holds doctorates in Zoology and Theology.

David A. Johnson

God Speaks Science: The Simple Chemistry of Life and Faith
Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications 2024. 127 pp. pb. £16.00. ISBN 9798385218509

David Johnson is an Emeritus Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Quillen College of Medicine, East Tennessee State University, where he taught Medical Biochemistry for more than four decades while pursuing research into a several medically relevant human proteins. He is a committed Christian who finds the amazing intricacy and complexity displayed by the molecular machinery of living cells clear evidence for an awesome God who created and sustains the Universe. He does not advocate "Intelligent design" but rather sees God constantly at work in all that is revealed through scientific

investigation. In this short book his intention is not to provide a detailed account of the relationship between science and faith – there are many others books that do that. Rather he employs his own enthusiasm for and appreciation of all that Biochemistry and Molecular Biology reveals about how life operates at the molecular level to enable Christians without a scientific background to catch a glimpse of the wonder of God's creation and why science is not a threat to faith. Indeed, it can enhance our faith in and appreciation of the creator God who reveals himself through both his creation and Scripture. Furthermore, he regards his scientific career as a Christian vocation with the knowledge gained being both a cause to worship and a means to enable us to benefit humanity as well as being good stewards of God's creation.



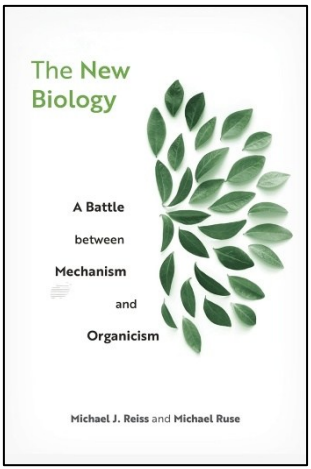
The book has a very personal, colloquial style that highlights his own enthusiasm for his subject and his faith. It comprises 20 short chapters, most of which describe key biochemical and molecular biological processes occurring in the cell, often linking them to disease states and their treatment. Each chapter starts with one or two quotes from a famous scientist, writer or the Bible. There are similar quotes within each chapter where he relates his scientific and Christian understanding of the world but this is not his major emphasis. Rather, he focusses on the science, describing some basic aspects of metabolism, the structure and replication of DNA as well as the structure and biosynthesis of proteins. He emphasises the importance of hydrogen bonds in the structures of DNA and proteins and how structure underlies their function as genetic material (DNA) and structural or catalytic entities (proteins). In many cases he uses particular examples from his own research that have medical relevance.

An Introductory video on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_nKk2LVQcE) provides further information.

Johnson's aim is to make his scientific explanations accessible to the non-specialist and this involves the use of numerous black and white diagrams which are linked to his YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/@DrJQuillen) where colour versions and fuller explanations are provided. The material is clearly presented but at a level that I think would better suit someone who already has a reasonable grasp of science. I suspect Christians without much scientific background might struggle with the content, especially with some of the chemical details. For readers of this journal there is little of substance related to the dialogue between science and faith and for the scientific content there are many other excellent publications that cover the same material at greater depth and in a slightly more coherent fashion. I found the author's organisation of material somewhat jumbled and repetitive, although this was compensated for by his infectious enthusiasm for the subject matter. However, this book might be one to recommend to Christians with a basic knowledge of science who wants to discover more about the amazing intricacies of life at the molecular level and so glean a new perspective on the wonder of creation and the awesome God who brought it into being and continues to sustain it.

Andrew Halestrap is Emeritus Professor of Biochemistry at the University of Bristol and a past Chair of Christians in Science

Michael J Reiss and Michael Ruse
The New Biology: A Battle between Mechanism and Organicism
Harvard University Press, 2023. 304pp. hb. £39.95. ISBN 9780674972247



This readable book is written by an ordained Professor of science education (Reiss) and an (atheist) philosopher of science (Ruse). In this they consider the old debate of whether biology can be represented as a mechanical system that merely obeys atomic and molecular (mechanistic) principles, or if it is best described from an organicist (holistic) perspective. The authors do not give a definitive answer, and they conclude that both organic and mechanical explanations have merit as metaphors for describing the complexity of biology. It is generally not possible to determine which one of the authors is speaking at any point, even though they come from different backgrounds (though both are well known for insisting that there is no inherent conflict between science and Christian faith). Readers of S&CB might be tempted to skip to chapter 8 'God and the New Biology', as I did. But that would be a mistake as the arguments in that chapter require an appreciation of the issues that are raised in the first three chapters. Taken to its extreme, a mechanistic model of biology becomes scientism – a form of nothing-buttery, in which life itself has no purpose, goal or meaning. The authors make the point that mechanistic views can tend to exclude discussion of teleology or final causes, while organic views of biology might have more to say about this. In this context, the authors suggest that recent developments in biology can make it easier to argue that biology is compatible with religious faith.

The first two chapters set out historical approaches to the philosophy of biology (from Aristotle and Plato through Newton, Kepler, Darwin and Dawkins and numerous others, with different views that largely depend on their historical context). By the mid-twentieth century, the issue seemed to have been settled, and the mechanistic paradigm had won the day. However, Reiss and Ruse illustrate that the issue is far from being decided, with both views appearing in both religious and non-religious contexts. The book is not specially about issues of science and faith, but it raises some important questions, and chapter 8 is entitled God and the New Biology"

The case for a 'New Biology' outlined in the third chapter, which includes mention of the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, highlighting three things that don't fit well within the standard evolutionary theory (69) developmental biology, developmental plasticity and niche construction. In these the organism is an active player in the process of evolution. A simple example is that of niche construction, in which by altering its environment an organism will affect which variants that are best adapted to the modified environment. Similarly, for development, genomes work upward and downwards through tissue and environment-specific gene regulation. These are compared with explanations based on the standard evolutionary theory, in a balanced approach of arguments. My personal fear is that these honest exchanges give fuel to false claims by young earth creationist that 'evolution is a 'theory in crisis' – it is not, and to be clear the authors are not suggesting this.

Chapter four takes these theoretical viewpoints into 'real world' examples of human health (sickle cell disease, deafness, obesity and schizophrenia). To some degree the implications for health are little more than the old plea to treat the whole patient in their context, not just the presenting disease. The arguments about sickle cell disease are little more than genetic changes in different genomic and environmental backgrounds. I really didn't see the relevance of

deafness to the new biology, though it does raise ethical question about what is 'normal' and the importance and value of the deaf culture. I also couldn't see the relevance of New Biology for approaches to obesity, other than admitting that it has a wide range of biological causes, and it's not just the result of overeating and lack of exercise. The current media preoccupation with anti-obesity drugs illustrates that the mechanistic model may now have the upper hand in this area. The case for different approaches to schizophrenia is more convincing, though it really shows that its cause(s) are poorly understood. This is really an argument from scientific ignorance. The closing section on holistic medicine, should really be on 'alternative medicine' and the use of traditional non-pharmaceutical approaches.

There may be some sense here as traditional (herbal) approaches may contain fortunate combinations of active ingredients. The hint that this might involve vaccine hesitancy is less appealing and dangerous!
The fifth chapter takes this into the areas of sex and gender. The discussion about sex underlines the fact that the presence of XX and XY chromosome pairs are not the sole determinants. In a minority of cases there is sexual ambiguity, resulting from abnormal chromosomes or unusual levels of sex-determining hormones. This does lead to questions of choice of language – what is normal/abnormal and what are high/low levels of contributing hormones. There doesn't seem to be any need for a 'new Biology', but a greater understanding of those who are affected. The section on gender is entertaining and informative – but what has that to do with the topic of the book? The same might be said about the following chapter (6), which explores the issue of 'race'.

Chapter 7 concentrates on the idea that the earth itself is an organism; the 'mother earth' or Gaia hypothesis. Readers of S&CB will probably be less likely to agree with the contents of this chapter.
Chapter 8 considers 'God and the New Biology'. The authors rehearse Barbour's four models for the relationship of science and faith: warfare,

independence, dialogue and integration. Dialogue and independence are considered under the headings of existence, values, consciousness and purpose, and the ways that mechanistic or organicist emphases interact with each one. Disappointingly, the question of integration is almost entirely devoted to the Catholic mystic Teilhard de Chardin, whose views are at times close to pantheism (or at least panentheism) who wrote about the cosmic Christ, the Omega point and panpsychism. Teilhard's emphasis on God's immanence and active involvement in the evolution of creation are helpful, but his mysticism, will sit uncomfortably with many readers of S&CB.

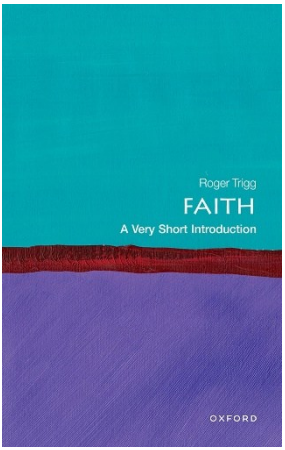
Chapter 9 comes to the practical issue of how these ways of thinking affect how biology is taught. The authors argue against a wholly reductionist approach and encourage teaching that includes a more holistic approach. They illustrate this by comparing learning about plant growth and metabolism in the confined conditions of a laboratory, with the same plant growing in a forest. This is all good and appropriate, but hardly warrants description as a 'New Biology'. As the authors agree. it is merely engaging at different levels with botany, ecology, zoology, etc. They then consider how this might affect the way that people have entrenched opinions on vaccine hesitancy and or nutrition. All well and good, but this is really sociobiology, morals and ethics, addressing questions that science is unable to answer, and that cannot be resolved by doing more experiments. Yes, these should be openly discussed in the classroom, but it doesn't qualify as a new biology.

To my mind the entire 'argument' of the book is fascinating but unnecessary. The word 'battle' in the title seems an unnecessarily harsh metaphor. When all is said and done the 'mechanistic' and 'organic' descriptions are only inadequate metaphors that describe different, but overlapping and integrated ways of describing the complexity of life. Overall, this is an interesting and well-written book, but I really don't get the question that has been posed. Life can be described at different

levels, each of which builds on others. Biology is complicated and we need to get used to it! God is equally involved with the integrated whole, as with the cellular and molecular mechanistic aspects and there is no contradiction or battle between them.

Keith Fox is Editor of *Science & Christian Belief*, Emeritus Professor of Biochemistry in Southampton University and former Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge. He is now curate at Highfield Christ Church, Southampton.

Roger Trigg
Faith: A Very Short Introduction
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 112 pp. pb. £5.80. ISBN 9780192849267



The 'Very Short Introduction' series of books are designed as a way to introduce yourself to a subject about which you might previously know very little. But therein lies a potential problem for a book on 'Faith'. Surely no reader comes to the subject 'knowing very little' or without some prior preconceptions. How can you 'introduce' so familiar a subject? For myself, I confess that I came with two preconceptions, either the word 'faith' would be interpreted so broadly as to become effectively meaningless (as Schaeffer once said of the word 'god') or the book might embrace the scepticism common within the academy which regards 'theology' as an anachronistic and unwelcome intruder, a maiden-aunt from another era perhaps, hanging around for too long at a party when the cool kids want to get on with having fun.

Fortunately, I was wrong on all counts. Once again, the series adopts a careful and methodical, though extremely concise, approach to the subject, but Trigg makes some interesting choices along the way.

Firstly, he maintains that 'faith' in the Western world is innately tied to Christian faith, the word may not adequately describe the relation of other adherents to their respective religions, for whom the concept of 'faith' holds a less significant role. Chapter 3 on Faith and Diversity explores this but whether this justifies the absence of any direct mention of Eastern Religions is questionable. Perhaps this is one area where a 'very short introduction' becomes a 'necessarily selective' one.

Secondly Trigg argues persuasively for the positive role of a particular kind of faith in society, a 'calm faith' with an intellectual grounding in reason leading to action. He sees the only alternative as nihilism, where the only way to resolve disagreements is by force.

The chapter on Faith and Science takes on Pinker, a champion of enlightenment ideas of progress. Trigg regards his unbridled optimism as unfounded and notes, via Kuhn, that science often advances through paradigm shifts which require a transfer of allegiance akin to a religious conversion. Other chapters address contentious issues such as the place for religion in educating children and the distinction between the 'Christ of faith' and the 'Jesus of history'. He even sees merit in reclaiming the idea of the church as a source of authority, placing necessary limits on individual autonomy in a way that the state cannot achieve without coercion. But his main thesis remains that faith must be 'in' something, citing Locke, who pinned his beliefs (ironically so foundational for humanism!) in a 'wise maker and sovereign master'.

Trigg admits that when faith is used as a crutch it can lead to fanaticism, and a faith that admits too much uncertainty may end up undermining itself. Must we therefore choose between flag-waving fanaticism or the wavering diffidence of scepticism? Trigg's alternative

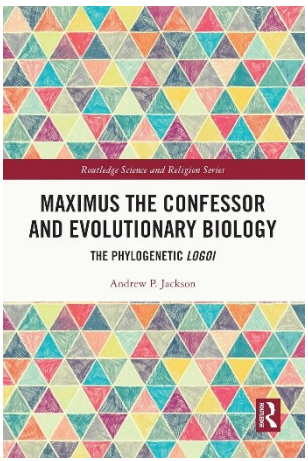
'calm faith', strongly guided by reason, is seen as a strength not a weakness, a place for wholehearted commitment requiring a personal response. Faith without action is dead, just as action without an underlying belief may be dangerously misguided.

In summary, this book provides a rational defence of the necessary place for (Christian?) faith in modern society, and recognises that the only alternative would be to cede all authority to those with power. This is what religious tradition challenges and must go on challenging.

Alan Kerry is a retired NHS GP and Editor / Administrator for *Faith and Thought*.

Andrew P. Jackson
Maximus the Confessor and Evolutionary Biology: The Phylogenetic Logoi
Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2025. 216 pp. hb. £135. ISBN 9781032763293

The author sets out to test the suggestion of a link between Maximus the Confessor's *logoi* doctrine and biological evolution and to initiate a serious dialogue between theology and evolutionary biology drawing mainly on Eastern Orthodox theological resources. After an introductory chapter setting out his aims and methodology, he begins in Chapter 2, 'The Evolutionary *Logoi*', by building the best possible case for such a link. Following a brief summary of Maximus's *logoi*, he presents the Neo-Darwinian synthesis, showing how it accounts for the unity and diversity of life via replication of inheritable variation, natural selection, and adaptation. He then points to some striking analogies between



the *logoi* doctrine and evolution: (i) Just as populations and lineages in biology descend from common ancestors, so too for Maximus the *logoi* are differentiated, hierarchically ordered, and unfold historically. (ii) The *logoi* are likened to 'ontological codes' (a kind of 'spiritual DNA') imparting both order and the possibility of future development. (iii) Though the *logoi* are 'fixed' in God, they are not inert; they propel creatures towards ultimate union with God.

Chapter 3, 'The Christo-forming *logoi*', takes a more detailed look at the *logoi*. Jackson begins by reviewing how Maximian scholarship has understood the *logoi* 'in God' – as divine ideas, divine wills, divine energies, or as the second person of the Trinity – and begins to tease out some of the implications of Maximus's contention that God is fully present in every creature. Turning to how the *logoi* have been understood to be 'in creatures', he summarizes Maximus's understanding of the relationship between universals and particulars.

This acts as a launchpad for a discussion of the idea of the *logoi* as substantial forms. Having considered the nature of the *logoi* on both sides of the created/uncreated divide, he explores what this implies for the God–creature relationship. Maximus is quite clear that the *logoi* are the same on both sides of the divide. How, then, can we protect the divine otherness? To answer this question, Jackson draws on John Zizioulas's summary of Patristic solutions to the problem of reconciling communion and otherness: (i) communion achieved by the immanence of the *logoi*, otherness maintained by the materiality of creatures; (ii) communion achieved by the divine energies in creation, otherness grounded in the unknowability of the divine essence; (iii) communion achieved by the incarnation, otherness maintained at the level of natures. He suggests a synthesis of the solutions resulting in a partial and dynamic panentheism.

Jackson moves on in chapters 4 and 5 to test the thesis against two major counterarguments. Chapter 4, 'The Purposeful *Logoi*', contrasts

the purposefulness of the *logoi* with the purposelessness of neo-Darwinism. He reminds us that, for all its apparent purposelessness, evolution proceeds by chance operating in a lawlike framework and questions how far this lack of purpose runs counter to divine providence. Nevertheless, Maximus's insistence on the inviolability of the *logoi* does seem to exacerbate the problem of purposelessness. Jackson argues that this inviolability does not forbid evolutionary change because fixed *logoi* determine essences while allowing modal variation and phylogenetic branching. This is plausible but leaves unresolved how radical macro-evolutionary novelties fit 'without confusion' into pre-existing *logoi*. This discussion leads him on to the question of providence and divine action. Having briefly discussed double agency and a creation that is entirely pervaded by the Spirit, he opts for a panentheistic naturalism: God acts in, with, and under natural causes; evolutionary mechanisms are secondary causes animated by the *Logos*. His approach safeguards immanence, but some readers may fear it blurs the distinction between Creator and creation. Furthermore, his reliance on the essence–energy distinction may not be convincing for non-Orthodox readers.

In chapter 5, 'The Good *Logoi*', he turns to the other main argument against the thesis: the goodness of Maximus's *logoi* versus the suffering and extinction involved in evolution. He suggests four potential ways to mitigate this tension: (i) creation as immature and evolving towards a good end; (ii) the material creation as divine anticipation of the fall; (iii) extension of the free will argument to some aspects of the nonhuman creation; or (iv) various theocentric approaches to suffering. It is an interesting approach to the problem of theodicy, but I'm not convinced he takes the discussion much further forwards.

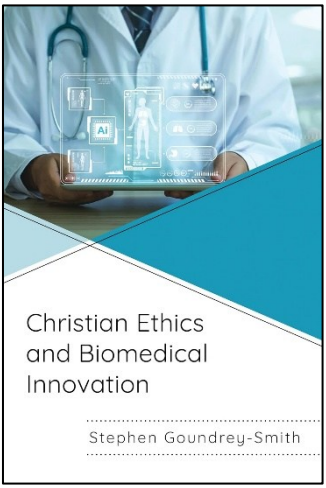
In a brief final chapter, he concludes that Maximus is a valuable source of theological insights relevant to science and, further, that the suggestions of a resonance between the *logoi* and evolutionary biology are well-founded. Finally, he offers several themes that emerge

from his work – essentially, a theological research programme: (i) questioning science's exclusive attention to efficient causation (and exploring the role of the *logoi* as formal causes); (ii) exploring Maximus's emphasis on creaturely particularity; (iii) developing the idea of providence as immanent; (iv) expanding on Maximus's understanding of the *logoi* as evolutionary.

Jackson's book offers an in-depth conversation between the *logoi* doctrine and evolution rather than a facile reconciliation. Overall, it provides a daring, creative, but preliminary synthesis and suggests constructive proposals that invite further scrutiny from both theologians and biologists.

Lawrence Osborn is a retired editor based in Glasgow. He maintains a research interest in Orthodox theology and its relationship with the natural sciences.

Stephen Goundrey-Smith
Christian Ethics and Biomedical Innovation
Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024. 304p. hb. £100. ISBN 9781666953602



This book is an academic and thorough exploration of the ethical principles that surround implementation of 'biomedical innovations', and it contains long lists of academic references. I was expecting much from the title, especially as the author has been a pharmacist and is now an ordained theologian. I anticipated that it might contain guiding principles for dealing with specific and complex biomedical innovations, of which there are many. However, I was disappointed, not by its academic rigour, which is beyond doubt,

but by its lack of interaction with specific biomedical issues. It will mainly be used by theoreticians, and is of little practical use for making ethical decisions on the real-life situations that are being posed by biomedical advances on an almost daily basis. The book frequently refers to 'radical biomedical technologies', by which he means nanotechnology, genetic enhancements, cybernetics, and cryonics (really!) (53) None of these is illustrated with a specific scientific example. A quick look at the index confirms the lack of interaction with any specific biomedical innovations and confirms that the focus is really on approaches to transhumanism. The book claims to be informed about the science – yet it almost never discusses it.

The first chapter helpfully explores the Christian theology of human bioethics from the question of what it means to be made in the image of God, it emphasises the importance of embodiment and the idea that we are co-creators with God.

In the second chapter, and several other places, the author is rightly critical of health technology assessment (HTA), which is a blunt tool for making ethical decisions, and does not account for dignity, social justice, autonomy and embodiment. It questions whether a person is really able to exercise personal autonomy if they have been modified by biomedical technology (60). Issues of the common good and social justice are discussed at length, and this became an exercise in theoretical social policy and sociobiology. Since we currently don't have distributive justice for existing simple cheap biomedical (drug) interventions, the discussion of equal distribution in a global 'enhancement society' seems almost pointless when considering new expensive and complex technologies. The second chapter comes closest to discussing specific innovations, but still only describes 'radical biomedical enhancements technologies'. The only specific example considered in the entire book is the possibility of a retinal-auditory interface in chapter 5 (220).

Chapter 3 acknowledges the need for state regulation to ensure public safety. How this is actioned so as to promote the common good will depend on how a government develops its public policy. This chapter acknowledges that in many instances there is not a clear distinction between therapy and enhancement, but then only discusses radical enhancement innovations. It would have been useful to give examples where the distinction is unclear and for which the outcome may depend on the individual context.

Chapter 4, considering public policy decisions for enhancement technologies, draws some analogies with the process for constructing the Warnock report on human embryology, and for introduction of the Summary Care Record (186) the second of which seems distant to the subject of the book.

Chapters 3-5 consider the involvement of public institutions and public policy in decision making and invokes a necessary triad of biomedical capability, ethics, and public policy, for which all three components are essential if we are to work together to support human flourishing. The author argues that there should be a distinction between ethical deliberation and policy discourse in the way that innovations are implemented and that Christians as citizens should contribute to forming public policy. The final chapter 6 is based around Aquinas' 'natural law' (for which the author sees the start of humanity as a beginning, not something to return to as we progress as God's co-creators) and Augustine's treatise in *The City of God* and its sociopolitical implications in a pluralist society.

Issues of the common good and social justice are discussed at length, though this becomes an exercise in theoretical social policy and sociobiology. Since we currently don't have distributive justice for existing simple cheap biomedical (drug) interventions, the discussion of equal distribution in a global 'enhancement society' seems almost pointless when considering expensive and complex technologies.

In several places the author dwells on the fact that we live in a pluralistic and multicultural society, and the need to look for common values in order to find consensus. This is a laudable pragmatic approach (emphasising shared values as much as scientific facts), though the book does not describe how such a consensus might be achieved and how any distinctly Christian views might influence such a consensus.

The book is repetitive and contains several details that aren't directly relevant or necessary, such as delving into sociopolitical theory. It often refers back to earlier chapters and then looks forward to later ones, making it difficult to follow the arguments. Its high cost suggests that it is only really intended for libraries. It is a thorough and academic discussion of sociopolitical ethics, but will be impenetrable to readers who are not experts in social and ethical theory. I look forward to a contribution from the author that shows how the principles on which he has pontificated might affect how we respond to specific ongoing real-life biomedical innovations.

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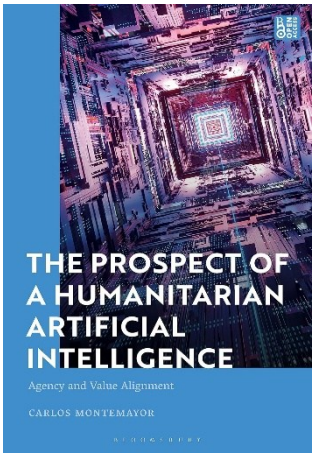
Carlos Montemayor
The prospect of a humanitarian artificial intelligence
London: Bloomsbury, 2023. 296 pp. hb. £85.00. ISBN 9781350348370

Machines made in the image of man have fascinated people for millennia. The Buddhist scholar Daoxuan wrote in the seventh century of the 'precious metal people' that recited sacred texts in a cloister and had wept when the Buddha Shakyamuni had died a thousand years earlier. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818, George Eliot's *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* in 1879 and Karel Čapek's *Rossum's Universal Robots* in 2021 explored through fiction the implications of

autonomous intelligence in creatures made by men. Carlos Montemayor now brings a philosopher's perspective to these questions in his book *The prospect of a humanitarian artificial intelligence*, an intelligent system that would benefit all humanity.



The discussion has become more pressing since advances in electronics in the mid-twentieth century made thinking machines a practical possibility. Edmund Berkeley's *Giant Brains* in 1949 considered the imminent arrival of electronic computers that could process general information as well as numerical calculations. He saw danger not in the machines themselves but in the antisocial human beings controlling them. Only when there was an effective guarantee of physical safety and adequate employment before mankind could be free from the threat of robot machines. The book was timely: 1949 also saw Maurice Wilkes' EDSAC commissioned in Cambridge and so the computer age was born. A mere seven years later a group of leading computer scientists convened a Dartmouth summer project on artificial intelligence with the aim of 'devising a way of programming a calculator to form concepts and to form generalizations'. The result was an agenda for research in computer science that continues to the present day.

Just two years later Stanislaw Ulam wrote in his obituary of John von Neumann of their 'conversation centered on the ever-accelerating progress of technology and changes in the mode of human life, which gives the appearance of approaching some essential singularity in the history of the race beyond which human affairs, as we know them, could not continue.' The singularity has been near for longer than we might think.

70 years later extraordinary progress has been made with that agenda but 'artificial intelligence' in the sense of imitating the human brain remains elusive. The mathematician Alan Turing's essay on *Computing machinery and intelligence* in 1950 posed the question 'Can a machine think?' and thought that conversations about poetry, arithmetic and chess might distinguish a person from a machine. People would understand poetry, machines would be good at arithmetic and chess might be challenging for both. Artificial intelligence would be achieved when they could not be distinguished by an observer. The question is naïve. As the computer scientist Edsger Dijkstra observed, asking whether machines can think is about as relevant as asking whether submarines can swim.

A computer beat the world champion at chess in 1997 and chat systems built on generative large language models can converse about poetry, but this is not the same as intelligence. Interest has moved on to 'Artificial General Intelligence' or AGI which might match human capabilities across a wide range of cognitive tasks although most experts shy away from discussing sentient machines.

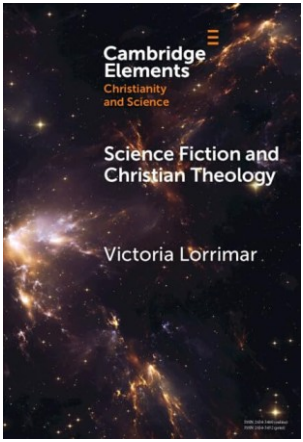
Montemayor draws a distinction between 'extensionally equivalent intelligence' (EEI) and 'intentionally equivalent intelligence' (IEI). EEI is AGI that is as reliable and accurate as human capabilities but without capacities for problem solving or learning. IEI augments this with motivation based on cognitive needs. The key to this is *attention*, the ability to sift information for data relevant for particular cognitive needs. This is a familiar task for a computer system but the book argues that it needs to be refined with moral competences related to autonomy and ethical sensitivity. These would take the IEI beyond a mere simulation.

Moral competence is important but it isn't clear it can't be simulated. And it isn't clear that its incorporation into a computer system

addresses Edmund Berkeley's concern articulated 75 years ago that the danger is not in the machines themselves but in the antisocial human beings controlling them.

Peter Robinson is Emeritus Professor of Computer Technology at the University of Cambridge and President of Gonville & Caius College.

Victoria Lorrimar
Science Fiction and Christian Theology
Cambridge Elements in Christianity and Science
Cambridge University Press, 205. 74 pp, pb. £15.64. ISBN 9781009428910



This relatively short treatise is a very welcome introduction to a wide range of sci-fi writing. A wide range of types of sci-fi literature are summarised, and the links to Christian eschatology well laid out and argued. There is an emphasis on new female authors, with enough of the narratives laid out to pique the reader's interest. The language is formal in style with extensive references, in keeping with the Cambridge Elements' mission to present authoritative evidence.

Victoria's main thesis is that all science fiction – not just that produced by Christian authors – is a useful arena in which Christian narratives can be explored in a non-confrontational and imaginative way. She challenges current science fiction writers to present realistic ideas with thought given to their implementation in today's society as part of NT Wright's vision of building the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

The body of the work is concerned with what readers may recognise as 'hard' sci-fi, with extensive discussion of themes of AI and human

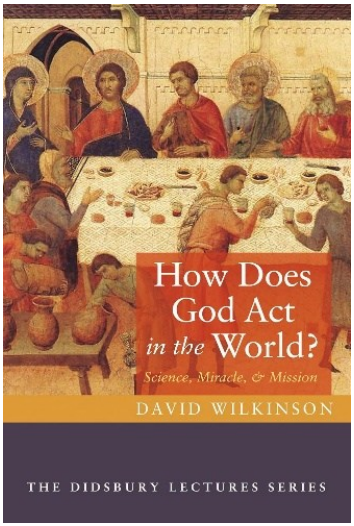
enhancement, the question of whether AI entities could partner with humanity in a fruitful way, and of the possibility of uploading a human mind to an electronic long-lasting medium in an analogous way to the Christian offer of eternal life. Victoria takes a positive and optimistic view of technology, welcoming its advancement, and celebrates 'hope punk' authors such as Becky Chambers for their quirky and warm portrayals of the future status of humanity in relation to alien races. Political utopias are also discussed, including Ursula le Guin's view of science fiction as a safe laboratory for proposing new ways of organising society. Victoria also argues that enhancement technology has the capacity to help people with physical disabilities to gain freedom and equality, although she also notes that some people would not choose that route as they value the different perspective that living with limitations can offer.

The last chapter is the most alluring, exploring an idea proposed by Donna Haraway of 'staying with the trouble'. The idea proposed is that science fiction could partner with the Christian vision of building the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, here and now. The challenge set by climate change could be met by serious proposals from science fiction authors, based on current science, in conversation with scientists whether or not they have a Christian faith. The usual narratives of apocalypse or other ways of wiping the slate clean tend to be dismissed in favour of a continuous forward timeline, where benevolent and personally sacrificial social movements might wrest humanity away from imminent destruction.

Christina Biggs is a data engineer at Defra, living in Bristol and taking an active part in the Bristol local CiS group.

David Wilkinson
How Does God Act in the World? Science, Miracle and Mission
Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books 2025, 139 pp. pb. £ 17.00. ISBN 9798385208814

Religious believers face the question whether God acts in the world, and if so how. If it is concluded that God can act, the problem is why He would act sometimes and not others, and the venerable problem of evil looms large. These issues are raised in this interesting and absorbing book, written by Professor David Wilkinson of the University of Durham. With both a scientific and theological background, he is well versed in dealing with the interaction of the two, and is also concerned about the impact of any perceived link on mission. He is a Methodist minister, and the influence of John Wesley, and Methodist theological discussions, particularly in the United States, come to light.



The book is based on the Didsbury Lectures, a series that invites well-known theologians as contributors. He says at one point (99) that he has approached the lectures with 'a model of dialogue', conducting a fluid conversation. This means that he covers a wide ground quoting from a range of relevant theological thinking, but sometimes without a clear thread of argument leading to any conclusion. Each page has footnotes referring to many contemporary thinkers, and, although a short book, the bibliography itself extends to 22 pages.

Some themes clearly emerge. Traditional mechanistic views of the universe, stemming from the work of Isaac Newton, have, he says (53)

'attenuated our sense of what is possible.' In his first lecture, Wilkinson insists (45) that 'chaos and quantum theory must be taken seriously' with their reminders of the varied and complex nature of the universe and the fact that there is unpredictability at certain levels. That does not mean, he recognises, that there are simply gaps in which we can insert the action of God, but when he says (45) that 'complexity and mystery must be maintained', we are not much further forward in understanding divine action. He is very good at pointing out problems and tensions, and making judicious remarks about them, without taking us very far into understanding how to resolve them.

A particular issue arises with his treatment of chaos theory, which, with quantum theory, can appear to demonstrate a lack of causation at some levels in the universe. This has been much discussed, and Wilkinson is tempted by John Polkinghorne's location of God's activity in the hiddenness of chaotic systems. Polkinghorne made a strong link between epistemology and ontology, but that can never be right because it links what there is to human capabilities. It suggests that reality depends on how far we can access it, and so becomes anthropocentric. Reflection on the reality of God, for example, shows that objective reality must surpass our ability to understand it. Similarly, just because we cannot access causes does not mean that they are not at work. Wilkinson may be wary of a 'God of the gaps' but fails to cast any further light on the problem.

The book stresses that scientific laws are descriptive not prescriptive, and that science is always provisional. Wilkinson notes how, in the pandemic, politicians thought that they could be led by 'the science', relying on a simplistic view of how science develops, particularly in the face of an unknown situation. Because of the provisional and complex nature of science, he states that theology (as well as politics) 'needs to be *informed by* but not *dominated by* science (96)'. He is surely right about this, but, despite much wise commentary, and the view that

science cannot rule out divine intervention, the book takes us little further in understanding God's action in the world.

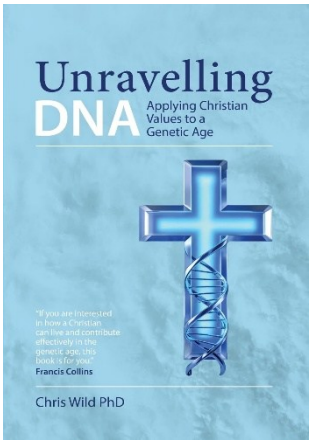
Roger Trigg is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, and his latest book is *Faith: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2024.

Chris Wild
Unravelling DNA: Applying Christian values to a genetic age.
GBJ Books, 2025. 262 pp. pb. £12.99. ISBN 9781068227509

This is an ambitious book about an ambitious molecule. As Dr Wild points out (5) the typical human cell contains around 0.000,000,000,005 grams of DNA. However, we humans, like all cellular organisms on earth, use DNA not only to encode genetic information for our working parts, but to transmit that information from cells to their progeny during life, and to our progeny during reproduction. DNA represents not only 'vertical' relationships between cells and organisms down generations, but 'horizontal' relationships between cells and organisms alive at the same time, and the widest sense, between all DNA-carrying organisms on earth – including relationships that are genetic (between siblings), societal (between persons and communities) aesthetic (between humans and daffodils) or extremely multivalent (between humans and *E. coli*).

Wild aims to explore advances in genetics from a Christian perspective, using a lens which he describes as the '**relationship test**' (9, 71-86) – that is, in light of human relationships with self, kin, society and the world. The grounds he gives for this approach are the centrality of relationship to human identity, to the Trinitarian understanding of God, and to the Christian tenets of love for God and neighbour. Note that the relationships in Wild's test span the biological (self and kin), cultural and ethical (society), biological / metaphorical (world) and theological/doctrinal (God). In my view, the breadth of this 'relationship

test' enables him to encompass a huge range of genetic technologies, but to the same extent it limits the theological or intellectual acuity of his analysis.



In Chapters 2-5, Wild is an assured guide across a vast terrain of genetic technologies, including forensics, genetic engineering, human genetic disease and therapeutics, and reproductive biology. There are some challenges, which I illustrate using his discussion of the UK's 14-day limit for human embryo research (76-79). Firstly, he inevitably omits some recent advances, such as the human embryo models derived from stem cell lines and thus incommensurate with the 14-day limit (see comment in doi 10.1038/d41586-023-03150-y). Secondly, he speaks with unacknowledged particularity, from the standpoint of UK science, culture and law – such as the 14-day limit, which is specific to the UK. Thirdly, the breadth of his material challenges substantive discussion.

In the aforementioned section, after touching on the Torah, Augustine, Aquinas and Islamic theology, Wild only urges that 'society … and the Church are engaged in responding to … proposals for change' (77) and observes the 'perennial difficulty of formulating decisions' (79).

Chapters 7-10 comment on the technologies in chapters 2-5 in light of the 'relationship test'. At this point, the discussion becomes kaleidoscopic under lenses of scripture, tradition, society and biology, but lacks theological incisiveness, or substantive proposals for a Christian response. For example, in the chapter 'Relationships with Family' after touching on genetic relatedness, mitochondrial donation, the spiritual metaphor of marriage between Christ and the Church, compatibility screening of potential parents, genetic selection for therapeutic reasons, and familial sharing of information in genetic

disease, he closes by remarking that in families God introduces individuals 'created unique and in His image and likeness' (135).

In the final chapter Wild observes that 'the Church, in all its diversity, should formulate responses to genetic advances' (199); but this book makes only limited gestures toward potential approaches for such responses. Wild has been an institutional, international leader in genetic sciences. I would welcome a sequel harnessing his profound knowledge of these technologies, and exploring possible routes – whether theological or ethical, local, national or global, sectional or ecumenical or interfaith – by which 'the church in all its diversity' may respond to genetics, and similar urgent challenges to our world.

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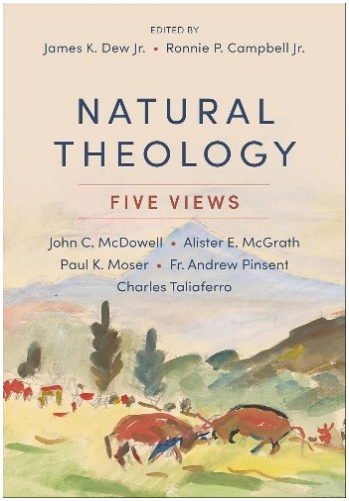
James K. Dew, Jr. and Ronnie Campbell, eds.
Natural Theology: Five Views
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. 289 pp. pb. $26.99. ISBN 9781540967251

In this volume, five relatively distinct voices seek to define and evaluate the project of 'natural theology,' an historic and important dimension of the Christian tradition. Three of the contributors, Charles Taliaferro (A Contemporary View), Andrew Pinsent (A Catholic View), and Alister McGrath (A Classical View), can be described as positive about this project, even if they challenge or revise some common understandings of it. The other two, Paul Moser (A Deflationary View) and John McDowell (A Barthian View), are more critical and cautious about the enterprise. Along with a brief introduction and conclusion by Dew and Campbell, the book comprises five primary essays, responses from the other four scholars, and a final response from the original author of each primary essay. In certain respects, the book covers familiar ground



and historical figures like Aristotle, Anselm, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, Paley, Darwin, and Barth surface routinely, as do discussions of cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God, for example. But significant parts of the book grapple with deeper and somewhat more abstract questions about how to define natural theology and its proper place in Christian theological reflection and spiritual experience.

With the possible exception of Taliaferro, none of the authors seem entirely comfortable with shorthand definitions of natural theology which conceive of it as the attempt to demonstrate the existence of God through philosophical reflection on the natural world without the assistance of revelation. McGrath argues (109-112) that such a clean binary between philosophical reason and theological revelation is basically a modern framework that should not be projected back onto the richer and more complex modes of natural theology practiced in earlier Christian eras. Based in part on a linguistic study of the terms *naturalis* and *supernaturalis* in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, Pinsert raises similar questions and suggests a pure natural theology which is completely quarantined from the grace of revelation might best (or only?) apply to pre-Christian cultures (62-74). Neither McGrath nor Pinsert deny that natural theology can have philosophical and persuasive value. As a Catholic theologian and scientist, Pinsert appears to accept (59, 72) without any radical qualifications the relationship between natural reason and the knowledge of God outlined in the First Vatican Council (1870). Still, both authors maintain that there are significant negative implications and vulnerabilities associated with ahistorical and reductionistic arguments for the existence of God

common in popular apologetics. Taliaferro appears the most confident in the capacity of modern cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments to weather criticism and is the only contributor to positively explicate such arguments in this volume.

The inclusion of Paul Moser's 'deflationary' and John McDowell's 'Barthian' perspectives adds considerable dramatic tension to the conversation. Moser is consistent throughout that the ambiguous results of natural theology cannot present to us a morally perfect God worthy of our worship and devotion. This concern overlaps in ways with the Barthian criticism that natural theology can lead to distorted and potentially idolatrous images of God that very often obstruct people from the true revelation of God given in Christ. Rather than join the fruitless debates around theistic proofs, Moser recommends that Christians ground their faith in the personal experience of God found through conscience, Scripture, and Christian community, a position he believes is central to the New Testament witness. This naturally invites the rejoinder that personal religious experience can be highly variable and interpreted in different ways. McDowell's essay is a sophisticated and interesting presentation of Barth's legacy which to my mind demonstrates that the Swiss theologian still has a useful role to play in modern conversations about natural theology. I suspect none of the authors, not even McDowell, would argue for more than that.

In my estimation, the book is more about competing Christian theories of natural theology than its contemporary practice. Another way of locating the book might be that it is focused on the intra-Christian conversation or debate about natural theology more than the interface of Christian faith with the non-Christian world, though of course both discourses inevitably intersect. Why do Christians believe in God? What are reasons that Christians believe others should believe in God? The book illuminates a diverse range of responses to these basic questions. In the process, the reader is provided with a number of stimulating

insights about the relationship between reason, theology, and the natural world.

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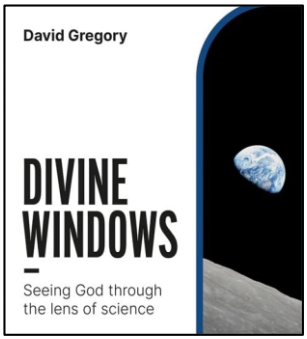
David Gregory
Divine Windows: Seeing God Through the Lens of Science
Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2025. 140pp. pb. £12.99. ISBN 9781800393318

David Gregory is well-positioned to bridge the gap between science and Christianity. As a Baptist minister holding a doctorate in Atmospheric Physics and a Master's in Applied Theology, he is well qualified to navigate this interaction in this concise, well-illustrated, 140-page volume.



His central thesis, following sociologist Peter Berger, posits that creation displays 'signals of transcendence'. Through these signals, Gregory hopes to enable his readers 'to journey further through the scientific vision of the world towards divine encounter'. The book focuses heavily on the aesthetic aspects of reality. Gregory explores themes such as imagination, wonder, play, and order, examining how these 'echo' within the natural sciences.

A recurring motif in the book is the British idiom of being 'sent to Coventry'; acting as if someone is not there or giving them the cold shoulder. Gregory argues that for many, modern science has effectively 'sent God to Coventry'. By examining metaphors and the use of

imagination, he aims to show that God is not silent. We should not silence Him. God speaks through the creation.

Gregory appears to place his work in conversation with classical theology, specifically the 'Book of Nature' tradition, but offers a twist. Augustine (c.354–430) argued that 'Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things.' He argued, 'Ponder heaven and earth religiously' (see *Sermo Mai*, 126 in https://inters.org/Augustine-Book-of-Nature). This is what Gregory suggests that we need to do: ponder the cosmos religiously.

Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096–1141) had written: 'For the whole sensible world is like a kind of book, written by the finger of God—that is, created by divine power—and each particular creature is somewhat like a figure, not invented by human decision, but instituted by the divine will to manifest the invisible things of God's wisdom' (see *Didascalion*, 7.4 in https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/flor/article/view/19170/20844). Rather than a book metaphor, Gregory uses a window metaphor. He suggests that we look through the physical world to see the divine beyond it.

The first half of the volume serves as a defence of a non-rational form of natural theology, prioritising imagination and the use of metaphors. Gregory draws upon a diverse ecumenical range of thinkers, including Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox voices, such as Bonaventure, Peter Berger, Michael Polanyi, Zachary Hayes, and Karl Rahner. There is no critique of these diverse voices, even though they come from different worldviews and faith perspectives; they are merely included to reinforce his thesis. Given that this is presumably aimed at a popular audience, this is forgivable.

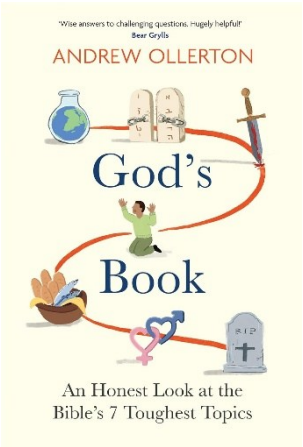
In the final section, he examines eight 'Divine Windows', namely star, moon, Earth, aurora, dust, life, other worlds and cosmos. Each section has a colour photograph with an explanation of the underlying science

behind it explained. And then some links to the Scriptures. While some of these connections can feel a little strained at times, the book remains a fascinating contribution to seeing God's fingerprints in the natural sciences. Gregory successfully 'ponders the cosmos religiously', offering a refreshing vision for those looking to reconcile scientific observation with imagination and wonder.

Steve Bishop is author of *Kuyper: A Primer* (Cántaro Publications, 2025), a Research Associate at UTC, Belfast, and a Visiting Fellow at the Neo-Calvinist Research Institute, TU Kampen.

Andrew Ollerton
God's Book: An Honest Look at the Bible's 7 Toughest Topics
Hodder & Stoughton, 2025, 352 pp. pb. £14.19. ISBN 9781399806459

The author is a pastor, communicator and presenter who has degrees in Geography, Theology and History, and a PhD in Historical Theology. This book presents answers to seven key difficult issues in Christian faith. The author is capable of an academic style (as in the publication of his PhD) but this book has a folksier discursive approach. Nonetheless, it generally attempts to be careful in its analysis.
CIS members may be particularly interested in Ollerton's first chapter on science, faith, and Genesis. The author has seen that the YEC of his background is implausible, and tries in a tolerant way to combine the approaches of eg John Walton, Ernest Lucas (who taught him), C J Collins, William Lane Craig and John Lennox. One problem is that for Walton neither the Hebrew *asah* nor *bara* mean 'create', to Collins *asah* means 'appoint' in Gen 1:16 but 'create' in 1:25 and 1:26 (so that chronology is preserved), whilst to others both terms imply create but the six days



were not intended chronologically. Ollerton, though, summarises the scientific choice as between (1) Young earth creationism (2) Old earth gap theory and (3) Old earth age-day theory, and finds (3) 'more credible'. Most of his cited authors, however, recognise that the six days do not represent the order of events in geological history, whether taken as long age-day periods or short bursts of divine creative activity. Neither Walton nor Craig see them as chronological, Lucas recognises the pattern of two threes and speaks of the 'literary cultural approach', and Lennox notes what is called the 'framework' theory of non-sequence - noting in the 2022 edition of his *Seven Days* the improbability of Collins' argument about day 4. Really a 'framework' idea should have been option (4) in Ollerton's options, as it seems taken generally by evolutionary creationists. It might have been useful, too, to note that some (like Craig and Lennox) tend to an ID (Intelligent Design) view that God sometimes added new structures in a way suspending natural evolutionary processes, whilst others do not. On Adam and Eve, Ollerton says 'The teachings of Jesus and Paul imply that Adam and Eve were historical people' (p.34). Well, Jesus in Matt 19 certainly took the Genesis creation account of humanity to show God's intention in marriage, but those who see Adam and Eve as archetypical and corporate also accept this. Paul's treatment of 'Adam' in Romans 5 is also complex. Ollerton does explore such ideas, and his final position is to recognise that Christians who believe in Scriptural inspiration have divergent views on this.

The second chapter in the book concerns the Exodus and OT laws. The plausibility of the Exodus account is defended, and then he looks at the various 'strange' and sometimes 'offensive' laws in the Torah. The cohesive nature of the laws is defended, and the idea that Israel should thereby stand out amongst the nations and ultimately thereby bless them. Some laws were founded in creation itself, but others were either purely temporary or fulfilled in Christ.

The third section is about the bloodshed in the conquest and war. The book argues that some of the reports of numbers slaughtered may not be literal, and the fundamental intention was to cleanse from idolatrous practice rather than genocide. The author makes as good a shot as he can but it seems doubtful that anyone can fully answer the obvious questions. Where we can all agree is that in the Christian era the aim is to drive the evil from people rather than drive out the evil people.

Section four raises the issue of good people suffering. God did not intend to create pain and suffering, and human sin is the cause of much of it. The author, though, wants to insist that God is fully sovereign, yet natural disasters etc occur. God does not *cause* bad things, but is in *control* of them. This is a 'mystery' and we need to 'embrace it without overthinking it.'

Section five looks at miracles and exorcisms, outlining a fairly standard evangelical analysis of these in its own particular style.

Section six concerns sexual ethics. Creation accounts and the teaching of Paul and Jesus are taken as implying sex is to be enjoyed within monogamous, faithful, heterosexual, lifelong marriage. A 'woman' is assumed to be defined by biological sex. The approach is open to a more egalitarian or complementarian view of marital relationships, but not to other diversity of relationships as per LGBT+. The approach does not venture into pastoral advice, but simply sets out a biblical bedrock.

The final section concerns future judgement, heaven and hell. In this, recognition is made of the increasing view amongst evangelicals that 'hell' implies destruction not unending torment - which is explicit in what is actually said by Jesus, Paul, John, Peter and the writer to the Hebrews. Ollerton himself seems to waver between a version of this in which the destruction occurs over finite time and an identification of hades as a hell with 'doors locked on the inside'. The treatment will not

aid those who want to look at the actual biblical evidence, but does reflect the present divergence of evangelical views.

The book attempts, as it promises, to address some very hard questions. It is recommended by those with backgrounds as diverse as Nicky Gumbel and Bear Grylls, and is gauged to a thoughtful but non-academic audience. On most controversial issues it takes a conciliatory tone, encouraging mutual tolerance of those with differing views. From the CIS viewpoint, the book sits within the general divergence of views which broadly accept the truth of geological time and role of evolutionary processes.

Dr Paul Marston is a former Senior Lecturer in a science faculty at a university, also has an M.A. in theology, and has authored various apologetic and theological works.

Important Note to All Members
SUBSCRIPTIONS

In light of the decision taken at the 2026 AGM to cease the subscription model of membership (see page 36), all members are asked to **CANCEL** their standing orders or payment method henceforth.

Any uncancelled subscriptions or money coming in after this final paper journal has gone out will be regarded as a donation towards the work of Faith & Thought. Thank-you for your support over the years, it is much appreciated.

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Are you engaged in or planning postgraduate study of some form into the area of Faith & Thought? Perhaps you're planning a sabbatical or enrolled on a course already. Maybe you work for an academic institution and would like to pursue your own study or research area? We are making available two grants per year of £1000 each to support such work. Maybe you know someone else who would benefit from this? At the 2018 AGM it was agreed that:

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.

d) Applications will be considered by Faith & Thought Council based on the following criteria:

a. the relevance of the proposed study to Faith & Thought's overall objectives
b. the clarity and coherence of the applicant's proposal
c. the impact the study will have on Faith & Thought's mission and the wider field of knowledge in this area

e) Before awarding the grant, successful applicants will need to have a named supervisor in place willing to give a reference for the applicant (though the supervisor need not necessarily be from an academic institution, for example those undertaking sabbatical studies may identify a senior minister, or other person willing to affirm the application).

f) Successful applicants should make available an article based on their research / studies to be published by Faith & Thought.

The Application Form is available on the website www.faithandthought.org We look forward to hearing from suitable applicants.

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