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ISSUE 11: POLITICS



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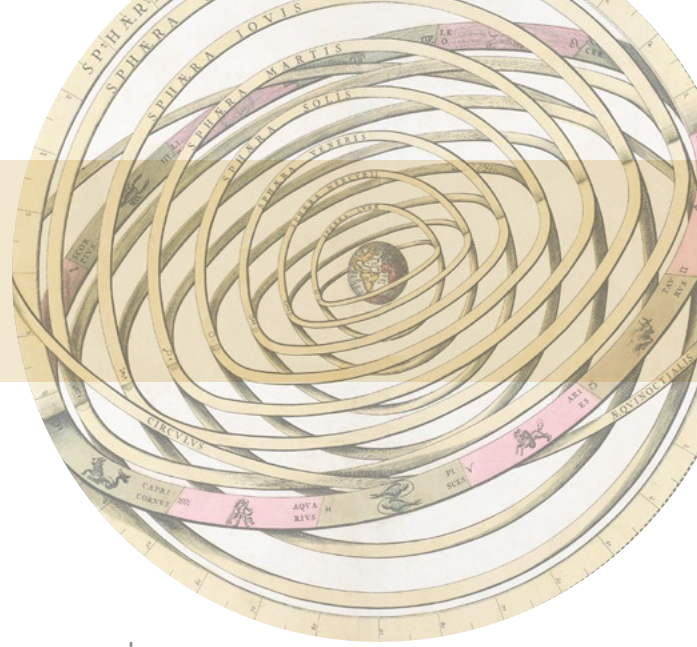


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The Big Picture is produced by the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge, a non-profit academic research centre whose vision is to foster Christian scholarship and public theology, rooted in spirituality and practised in community, for the glory of God and the flourishing of the church and world. Our resources and events are all aimed at exploring answers to the question: How then should we live?

The Big Picture seeks to: (1) Educate, inform and inspire readers about public theology, (2) Ground our work in Scripture, (3) Embody the big-picture vision of the gospel with creativity, (4) Connect with good practice wherever it is found, and (5) Build community locally and globally with our friends and partners actively represented in the magazine.

Please be aware that the articles that we choose to publish have not been selected because they reflect an official KLC position or the views of the editors. Our aims above encourage deep discussion of a plurality of views, across traditions, within the broad boundaries of the gospel. We celebrate difference without division.

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COVER ARTWORK

Maynard Dixon, *Shapes of Fear* (1930-1932). Our rather ominous cover image shows a cluster of figures robed in skins or rough fabric. One looks in our direction revealing the absence of a tangible form beneath the clothing. This image resonates in multiple ways with the present political moment, not least in the tendency to treat the Other with fear and suspicion. Core to the Christian political calling is to recognise first and foremost the humanity even of our enemies.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Politics

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

I like to compare politics to the plumbing in a house. Unless you are a plumber you ignore it until something goes wrong, and then you quickly discover how crucial plumbing is to a functioning house. We are not wrong generally to ignore the plumbing in our house. A house is there to be lived in and we do well to get on with that. Politics is all about *public justice*, and for those of us not in politics and who live in healthy democracies we rightly get on with our lives and our areas of work without constantly obsessing about politics.

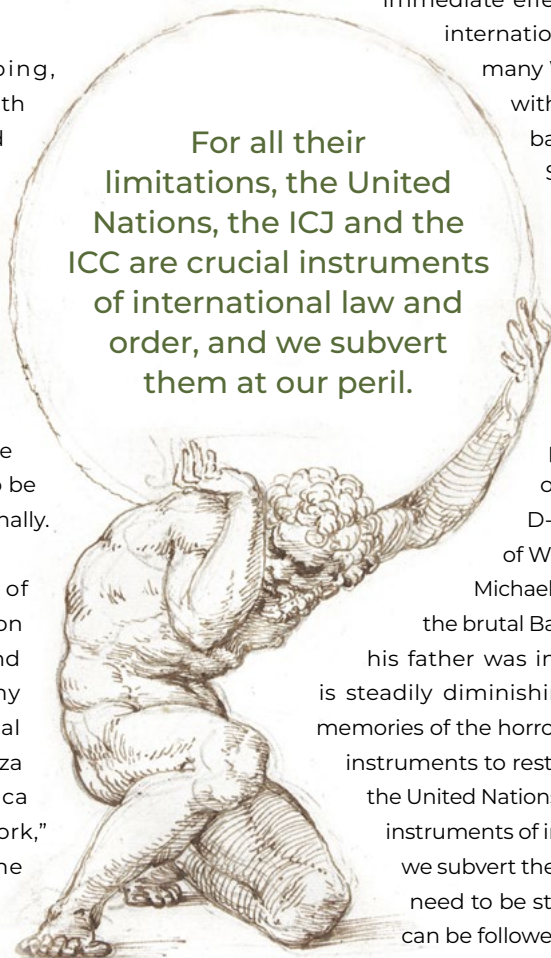
However, just like plumbing, politics can go horribly wrong with devastating consequences, and thus, even as we go about our lives, we do well to remain alert to such possible misdirection. 2024 is the year of elections with sixty-four countries around the world scheduled to hold national elections. So many elections hold considerable potential for ferment and disarray. Indeed, as we look around the world, it is hard to be optimistic about politics internationally.

Since the dreadful attacks of October 7 last year, Israel's war on Gaza continues unabated as a kind of domicile. As I explain in my preface to "A Letter to the Global Church about the Genocide in Gaza from the Middle East North Africa Peace and Reconciliation Network," it is estimated that beyond the c. 40 000 identified deaths, up to about 186 000 may now have

died in Gaza from this conflict. The dreadful situation in Gaza alerts us unequivocally to the fact that politics cannot be conceived of as only an internal, national matter, but also involves how nations relate to other nations. South Africa took Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) which found that there was indeed a plausible case that genocide was taking place in Gaza.

One might have thought that such a ruling would have immediate effect, but alas, it turns out that international law only really matters to many Western nations when it sides with them. This bodes extremely badly for the future. As Michael Shipster explains in his article "Is the International Rules-Based Order Now Broken?", the rules-based international order emerged after World War II in order to prevent and constrain conflict among nations. This year many celebrations took place here and in Europe and other countries to remember D-Day, the beginning of the end of World War II. In a separate article, Michael Shipster writes movingly about the brutal Battle of Kohima in 1944, in which his father was involved. That war generation is steadily diminishing and, alas, so too are our memories of the horror of war and the need for legal instruments to restrain it. For all their limitations, the United Nations, the ICJ and the ICC are crucial instruments of international law and order, and we subvert them at our peril. If anything, they need to be strengthened, so that decisions can be followed up with real consequences.

For all their limitations, the United Nations, the ICJ and the ICC are crucial instruments of international law and order, and we subvert them at our peril.





Thomas Rowlandson (1814), *Death and Bonaparte, The Two Kings of Terror*

Perhaps the most worrying election this year is that in the USA. Contemporary politics in the US reads like a fantasy novel – you couldn't make it up! – but the consequences for Americans *and the world* are serious. In the front of my cottage a small Ukrainian flag I put there at the outset of Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine still flies, but it is faded and threadbare. The results of the US election will have major consequences for Ukraine, and thus for Europe, perhaps for NATO and thus the very architecture of the rules-based world order set in place after World War II.

How should we react to all this turmoil? Such turmoil is not new in history and we have weathered far worse storms before. However, such storms come at enormous cost, and we should avoid them if we can. Furthermore, in a globalised world a storm far away can have devastating consequences locally. Indeed, our neighbour that we are called to love may not only be next door but lying under rubble in Gaza. Thus, *firstly, we need to become conscious of the epicentres of the turmoil and think hard about them.* Soundbites, knee jerk reactions and media headlines or lack thereof are no help here. Take Gaza as an example. The UN Secretary-General was undoubtedly right that October 7 did not happen in a vacuum. If that is the case, then we need to know the historical, narrative context in which it occurred. Apart from this narrative we will be in no position to arrive at a proper view of the situation.

Secondly, we need after careful consideration, to take what action we can to prod such epicentres of turmoil in the direction of justice and peace. That will certainly include prayer, but it will also involve action, writing to our MPs, joining action groups, etc. As Jesus said we are

to hunger and thirst after righteousness, and that includes societal and international justice.

Thirdly, we need together to live the solution. When I was writing my *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today*, I read Lewis Mumford's massive tome *The City in History*. He describes well the demise of the Roman Empire. It had become bloated and over-extended; cruelty had become a form of entertainment. Where, asks Mumford, was the solution to be found? His answer is remarkable: it was already being lived quietly in the wings, in the monasteries. Their micro-solutions became the macro-solutions for Europe. Likewise, we need to chart the possible futures in the light of current trends, and get on now with living the solutions until their time comes. We may well be living amidst "the encircling gloom," but we are not without hope. There is a slain lamb on the throne of history, and injustice will never have the final word.

**Where was the solution to be found?
It was already being lived quietly in the wings, in the monasteries. Their micro-solutions became the macro-solutions for Europe.**

KLC is a research centre and not a policy think tank. Our job is to encourage hard thinking about public issues from a Christian perspective. In this edition of *TBP*, you will find a variety of perspectives from a variety of authors on a variety of political – and other – issues. Read closely, and you will see that they do not all agree with each other. This is as it should be – none of them express the "official" view of KLC, and we hope that they will provoke you to think hard for yourself about the issues they raise. There is much at stake.



Banksy, *Girl Frisking Soldier* (2007, Bethlehem)



RESISTING THE *Political Idol* OF OUR PROGRESSIVE AGE

BRUCE RILEY ASHFORD

During the summer of 1918, Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* appeared in Germany. In two hefty volumes, the author set forth an analogy between biology and civilizational history. As plants and animals are born, mature, and eventually die, so too do civilizations. Spengler was convinced that Western civilization would soon die, just as the Babylonian, Egyptian, and Roman civilizations had reached their end. As evidence of the West's imminent demise, the author pointed to the disintegration of authority, lust for power, material gluttony, and the coddling of youth.

Meanwhile, more than a century has passed. Although Spengler's prediction was premature – given that Western civilization still shows signs of life – the present condition of Western culture is cause for grave concern. Our societies are riddled with wars and rumors of wars, breakdown of the family unit, environmental concerns, chronic social upheaval, widespread unemployment, spikes in crime and addiction, and more. None of these problems are new, yet never before has our civilization confronted so many problems simultaneously, each mutually reinforcing the others.

Western societies realize the situation is cause for deep concern. Some have tried to manage the problem politically by delegating the diagnostic and prescriptive tasks to specialists — bureaucrats, social scientists, economists, and others. Others, recognizing the need to search for a single root cause, have laid the blame on some wrong “structure” in our society, such as Capitalism, and argued that Western problems would disappear if only we had the wisdom and courage to overthrow the current structure and replace it with a better one. Instead of reform, they seek to foster revolution.

Yet, while it is imperative to address isolated problems within society and to look for corruption in the structure of our society, it is foolish to conclude that these are primarily or solely to blame while we, the human agents, are little at fault. We must evaluate the deeper currents in Western life, evaluating the religio-ideological motives that fundamentally direct our societies and their cultural institutions.

Upon evaluating the course of Western civilization in the years since Spengler's prediction, it seems the deepest and most widespread religious malady is what can be called the “humanitarian religion” of Western society. A bastardization of the Christian faith, it can be summarized in the following way: humankind is the measure of all things; peace and unity are the natural condition of humanity; the fragmentation of humanity into nation-states and religions is the root cause of evil; and the abolition of strong forms of religion and the nation-state will usher humanity into a new era of unity and peace.¹

Writing mid-twentieth-century, Hungarian moral and political philosopher Aurel Kolnai (1900-1973) identified humanitarian religion as the West's dominant secular religion, a perverse imitation of Christianity that hijacks elements of Christianity but strips them of their transcendent moorings. Just as Communism had, in Hungary's backyard, transformed charity for the poor into hatred for capitalist society and contempt for human rights, so Humanitarianism in other European nations had coopted Christian teachings about human nature and sin and placed them within an immanent frame. Kolnai's concern is that Humanitarianism impairs

¹ Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Idol of Our Age: How the Religion of Humanity Subverts Christianity* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018).

moral cognition by blaming evil on social origins and systemically corrupted institutions, and predicted that Christian positions on marriage, divorce, sexuality, and abortion would soon be seen as unintelligible and even reprehensible.²

What Kolnai predicted has now come true. The relegation of evil to the systemic level without acknowledging its rootage in the human heart has led to a revolutionary impulse to overthrow regnant systems, institutions, and religions. Once old norms and institutions – regarding gender, sex, marriage, the economy, the laws of warfare, or whatever – are overthrown, humanity can take a great leap forward toward its natural state of unity and peace.

From where does this humanitarian and revolutionary impulse come? On the one hand, it's as old as the Garden of Eden in its tendency to shift blame, play the victim, and re-engineer life on its own terms. On the other hand, the specific shape of the lie can be traced directly to nineteenth-century Europe – not to Karl Marx but to his senior counterpart, Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Unbeknownst to itself, the West is beholden to the vision arising from Comte's positivist yearnings for a "religion of humanity."

In his magnum opus, *System of Positive Polity*, in a chapter entitled "The Religion of Humanity," the positivist Comte suggests Western societies replace the love of God with a love for Humanity.³ Throughout his writings, he repeatedly appeals to Christian concepts such as spirituality, charity, and faith but strips them of their transcendent frame of reference. Rejecting Christian teaching on original sin and human depravity, he argues that utopia can be achieved within the immanent frame by abolishing the root causes of evil — strong forms of religion and the nation-state. Somewhat amusingly, he tried to transform his vision for a humanitarian religion into concrete form, replete with feasts, rites, congregations, and a liturgical calendar. Unamusingly, Comte, in a way, saw himself as replacing Christ as the savior of a new humanity.

Nearly two centuries later, most Europeans and an increasing number of Americans have begun to buy into Comte's vision, blaming strong forms of religion and the nation-state as the cause of war and evil.⁴

Thus, Comte's vision to replace the nation-state with a borderless international "community" and Christianity with secular Humanitarianism found significant traction. The humanitarian proposal is hard to refuse because it presupposes that humans are fundamentally good and promises we can achieve unity and peace if we only eschew the religious and national commitments that have caused society's ills. The Christian proposal is hard to accept because it affirms that evil resides in the human heart, that wars will never cease, and that there will be no great leap forward for humanity until Christ returns.

Yet, although the Christian proposal is a hard pill for society to swallow, it is the surest remedy for the maladies of our age. Foremost among the Christian emphases are four: the location of evil, the instrument for change, the primacy of charity, and the virtues of the nation.

The Location of Evil

To reject humanitarian religion's near-exclusive emphasis on structural "sin" and systemic corruption is not to reject this exercise as a whole. The Bible itself is, in part, an exercise in critical theory, unmasking as it does the root idols and ideologies that bring corruption and misdirection to societies. Likewise, church history is replete with examples of Christians who expose the idolatrous "deep structures" of secular society; Augustine's *City of God* is perhaps the earliest and most successful example, exposing Rome's quest for "justice" as a mask for its lust for power and its philosophy and religion as hopelessly inadequate.

Yet, our recognition of structural evil must be paired with our recognition that evil arises from the human heart and, thus, that the overthrow of human systems or structures will never eventuate in the abolition of war or other evils. As Eric Voegelin noted repeatedly, we cannot "change" the world. The world is fallen and will be until Christ returns. We can work to install the best regimes, work for decency, and aim for justice, but we will never take a great leap forward anthropologically. The two realities — individual responsibility and systemic corruption — must be held in proper tension if we will expose the full spiritual and political dimensions of social evils.

The Instrument for Change

Closely related to the question of evil's location is that of the proper instrument for social, cultural, and political change. Secular religions and political movements tend inexorably toward revolution as the instrument for change. If individuals aren't riven by depravity or saved by grace, and if evil is therefore located in systems and

2 Aurel Kolnai, "The Humanitarian Versus the Religious Attitude," *The Thomist* 7:4 (1944): 429-57.

3 Auguste Comte, "Conclusion: The Religion of Humanity," in Gertrud Lenzer, ed., *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 381-89.

4 Among the contemporary thinkers who draw such a connection are Pierre Manent, Daniel Mahoney, Rémi Brague, Mary Ann Glendon, Roger Scruton and Paul Seaton.

structures, the solution is revolution. But “change via revolution” contradicts the deepest currents of Christian theology. God’s response to sin is reformational rather than revolutionary. In response to the first couple’s sin, God didn’t overthrow creation order and embark on a new project, instead offering grace that restores nature and reforms individuals and institutions.

This was one of the concerns registered by nineteenth-century Dutch historian Groen van Prinsterer’s *Unbelief and Revolution* as he responded to the secular progressive impulse emanating from the French Revolution.⁵ With the stated aim of helping society take a great leap forward, the French revolutionaries sought to overthrow God, revelation, and transcendent morality and wielded a false anthropology that blames institutions, rather than persons, for the origin of evil. Ultimately, as all social revolutions do, the French Revolution eventuated in widespread bloodshed and manifold unforeseen negative consequences.

As Groen did in his day, we must do for our own era, foregrounding the consequences of sidelining God, revelation, and transcendent morality, and the desire to overthrow strong forms of religion and the nation-state. We must persuade our neighbors that the moral order should be framed in relation to creation order, political authority should be understood as something ordained by God, law and justice should be rooted in an objective moral order funded by God, and truth should be understood as something objective and rooted in God’s revelation of himself. If our societies do not retrieve these underpinnings, we will experience the consequences of this form of unbelief that is antithetical not only to Christianity but to creation order as well.

The Virtues of the Nation

An exploration of Scripture and history reveals that God intends for human beings to have communities that are located between the local and global, with religious communities and nations being prominent among them. Scripture and history everywhere presuppose and affirm the existence of nations as communities that mediate between the individual and the vast corpus of global humanity. Not only is the nation’s existence affirmed in this time between the times, but certain nationally distinct cultural realities will carry over into the new heavens and earth.⁶

Thus, in response to many Europeans and an increasing number of American progressives who yearn for humanity



Emily Crawford, Unsplash

to progress inexorably toward unification through a vague, global humanitarian sentiment, we must resist and demur. Neither the West nor other civilizations can function healthily as loosely defined and endlessly malleable body networks for commerce and communication, which is to say, multicultural bazaars.⁷ We will deteriorate further if we continue to conceive our societies as composed of individual consumers who have individual rights and should be governed only by anemic multi-national conglomerates (e.g., the European Union) or a global community of governance (e.g., the United Nations). This humanitarian-religious view of the nation must be rejected. “There has never been, and there is not now, and there will never be a world without borders.”⁸ Human division cannot be overcome by commerce and communication.⁹

The Virtues of Strong Religion

The eradication of strong forms of religion is impossible, and the suppression of strong religion yields a manifoldly negative return. Both history and Scripture make clear that human beings are worshippers at heart, inexorably drawn to ascribe ultimacy to and organize our lives around an

7 Pierre Manent, “Democracy without Nations?” *Journal of Democracy* 8:2 (1997): 97-102.

8 Pierre Manent, *Beyond Radical Secularism: How France and the Christian West Should Respond to the Islamic Challenge*, trans. Ralph Hancock. (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2016), 36.

9 Pierre Manent, *Democracy without Nations? The Fate of Self-Government in Europe* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 27-46. This is not to say that commerce and communication cannot be helpful in reforming injustices. It is to say that they cannot be relied on to eliminate the effects of depravity.

5 Groen van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

6 Richard Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Object of supreme affection. Thus, if we eradicate strong forms of traditional religion *en toto*, we will end up with pseudo-religions wrapped around the idols of sex, money, power, and so on.

Indeed, modern political ideologies function as pseudo-religions wrapped around their chosen idols, replacing traditional religion in significant ways. As David T. Koyzis has demonstrated, modern political ideologies tend to ascribe ultimacy to some aspect of the created order, focusing on their chosen idol to “save” society by eradicating the “evils” that threaten their idol and beckoning “We the People” to embrace these ideologies as social saviors. Classical liberalism and libertarianism ascribe ultimacy to individual autonomy; nationalism to the primacy of the nation or a titular ethnic group within the nation; socialism to the revolutionary fostering of material equality; progressivism to revolutionary social change; and conservatism to the preservation of cultural heritage. Indeed, modern ideologies are systems of thought wrapped around idols; having absolutized an aspect of the created order rather than ascribing ultimacy to God, they organize society and culture around their idol, thus corrupting and misdirecting the whole socio-cultural fabric.

Conclusion

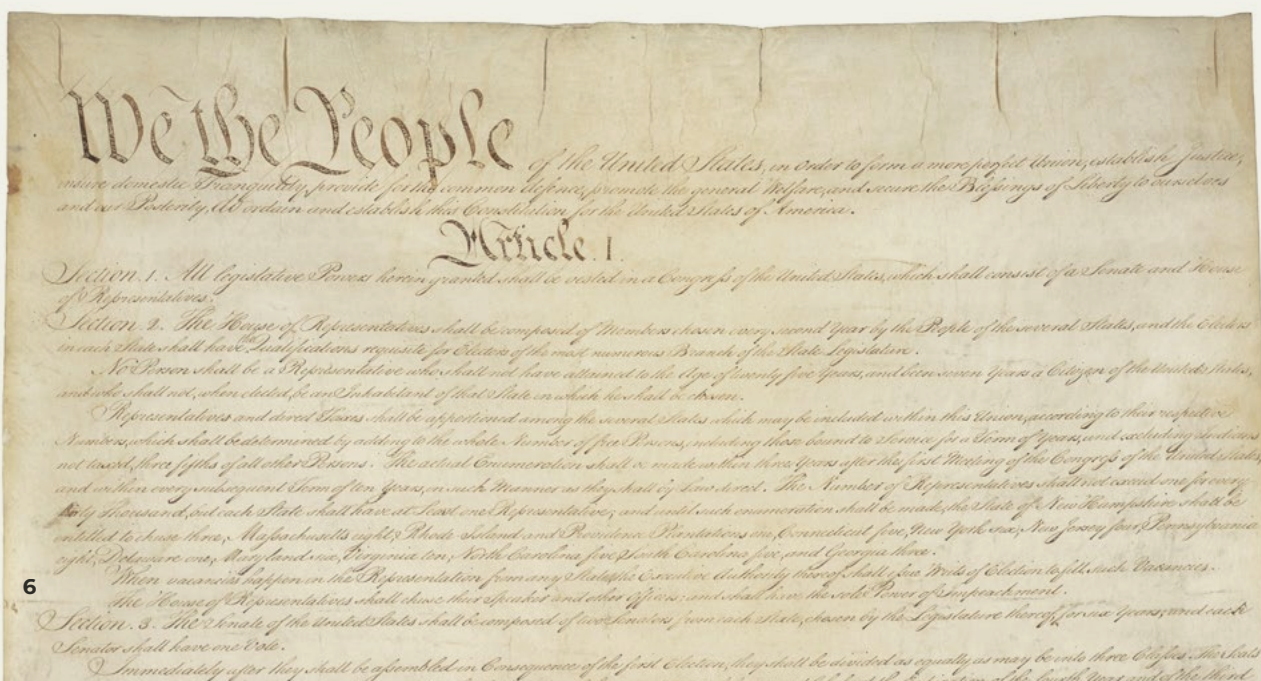
In conclusion, the West’s self-destructive trajectory of Spengler’s day has worsened during ensuing years. Promising unity and peace through the abolition of strong forms of religion and the nation-state, today’s humanitarian religious impulse and its revolutionary aspirations have captivated the imagination of many in the West. However, as history has shown, attempts to engineer utopia through revolutionary upheaval have often led to unintended consequences and further strife. Moreover, by displacing traditional moral frameworks and neglecting the inherent brokenness of human nature, the humanitarian impulse



Paul Gauguin, *Le Christ jaune* (1886)

risks undermining the very foundations of civilization. Thus we must renew the Christian proposal, which offers a sobering yet hopeful alternative. By affirming the reality of evil and the need for individual and societal redemption, Christianity provides a framework for addressing the root causes of societal malaise while fostering genuine reconciliation and renewal. Emphasizing the importance of moral responsibility, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the virtues of strong religious faith, Christianity offers a path forward that transcends the fleeting promises of secular ideologies.

Dr Bruce Ashford is a Senior Research Fellow at the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology.



Politics in
an Age of
Division and
Difference

Bearing with One Another

ROSS
HENDRY

We live in an age of increasing divisiveness where difference is weaponised to pull us apart. Whether politics is a cause or effect is unclear, but whatever the relationship between the two, democratic politics characterised by civility is often perceived as a barrier to attaining the good life.

President Trump survived a recent assassination attempt, Christian nationalism is an increasingly powerful political force alongside other extreme political ideologies and the recent UK General Election was marked by false claims, threats, intimidation and even violence. In view of these undercurrents, Christians must choose to “be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph 4:2). This may seem weak, ineffective, and idealistic, but it is the cornerstone of our public witness.

Bearing with one another is the antidote Christians offer amidst a politics of division. It implies a refusal to see difference as a problem and instead seeing difference as an important part of God’s creation, as something to be celebrated, and as a glimpse of the new heaven and earth to come. This doesn’t mean we ignore areas of disagreement. Rather, it involves confronting difference in healthy ways as we seek to understand where we can live with disagreement and where we must seek unity. We do this because, in the midst of our diversity, we share the image of our Creator. In “the other” we see not an estranged enemy but a reflection of the divine. We also see the mirror of our own sin and brokenness. My political opponent is no better or worse than I am. Jesus died for both of us.

Bearing with one another comes with humility and generosity born of self-awareness and a robust doctrine of common grace. After all, to suggest that any group has a monopoly on truth and wisdom is theologically and

empirically bankrupt. Just consider how the book of Proverbs ends with wisdom from a non-Israelite king and his mother (Prov 31:1). Regaining a proper perspective of common grace should lead to virtues that create the space for others to present their arguments; and should teach us to listen respectfully and seek to understand those of different viewpoints, willing to concede when we are wrong and others are right.

This is an apt description of healthy pluralism. Unfortunately, many evangelicals consider pluralism a “sell-out” rather than a means of loving my neighbour. Writers such as Teresa Bejan have explored the complexities of pluralism, asking whether there can be “too much” diversity and difference for pluralism to function, and the limitations of toleration if there are no shared values or beliefs. Such questions are increasingly relevant as our society becomes more diverse and holds less in common.¹ But these must be seen as challenges to overcome not insurmountable barriers. It is not easy. John Stott once wrote that “every Christian should be both conservative and radical; conservative in preserving the faith and radical in applying it.”² We find these words hard work, but they will be key to confident, healthy political engagement.



Politics should be about navigating difference, not wishing it away; about reaching agreement for the public good; about using power, not to dominate, but to pursue justice and the flourishing of others. You could even say politics is about bearing with one another in love. This is the Christian and Christ-like way of doing politics.

Ross Hendry is CEO of the social policy charity CARE (Christian Action Research and Education).

1 Teresa Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

2 John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 26.

Spiritual Formation

in the Year of the Election

TOM KENDALL

With roughly 49% of the world heading to the polls this year, not least the UK and the US, 2024 will have major implications for politics across the globe. As citizens of these nations, Christians have the opportunity to vote and so shape their nations for good or for ill. As believers exhorted not to “conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” (Rom 12:2) many understandably want to know how it is they should vote.

The cultural context of which we are part, our own theological tradition and the political issues of the day will all inform the political conversation, making any definitive “Christian answer” dubious at best. Indeed, there are great dangers here, for faith can be a powerful political tool, and not all actors who seek to wield it have good intentions. Yet it is right to hope that our vote will reflect (however imperfectly) the creed we profess.

So, as we head to the polls, how does the gospel shape our engagement with the political landscape before us?

What is politics for?

There are of course a myriad of ways one could respond to such a question. Yet, what the church truly needs is to rediscover a distinctly Christian conception of politics. As David Koyzis says, “we cannot ... be content to consign [politics] to a neutral, ‘secular’ realm or to the prince of this world. Rather we must acknowledge and live out Jesus Christ’s claim over it.”¹

¹ David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey & Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 195.



A Christian conception of politics must begin with the origin of government itself, which we are told in Romans 13 comes from the ordinance of God and flows out of common grace for the benefit of all. Timothy Laurence contends that “public authority exists for the good of the people ... Or, if you prefer Augustine’s term, the magistrate is there to ‘love’ his people.”² He argues that this love takes shape through the use of authority to commend good and punish evil, self-limit its scope to public order, and govern according to law.

This conception of government stands distinct from the modern secular paradigm which views government primarily as an extension of the self, a bureaucratic system that exists to reflect and manifest our desires and dreams. Oliver O’Donovan says this of contemporary democracy: “Now reinterpreted as a populism of the common will, democracy collapses in on itself, as laws, political parties, elections and executives no longer appear as collaborative instruments of just and wise government.”³

To understand government as a God-ordained and ordered institution presents a stark contrast to the prevailing view of politics as “not given to us but constructed by us.”⁴

² Timothy Laurence, ed., *Good News for the Public Square: A Biblical Framework for Christian Engagement* (Lawyers Christian Fellowship, 2014), 35.

³ Oliver O’Donovan, “Review of *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* by James K. A. Smith,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 20.2 (2020), 280-1.

⁴ O’Donovan, “Review” 280-1.

How am I to relate to politics?

With highly detailed polling and increasingly identitarian undercurrents driving many contemporary political trends, the matter of identity becomes increasingly important. Yet, to be a Christian is to find your identity radically transformed in light of the gospel.

The gospel does not, however, remove believers from politics, for to be a Christian is to have a political identity. After all, Jesus' message was inherently political: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15) Peter frames Christian identity in political language: "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9), and Paul describes believers as "citizens of heaven" (Phil 3:20). As a result, it is unsurprising that early Christians and their neighbours understood the gospel to pose a political threat to the status quo with much early persecution stemming from the fact that Christians purportedly went around "saying that there is another king called Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7).

For the Christian then, political identity is primarily ordered through and grounded in their salvation story. Consequently, the political divide that most concerns Christians is not between left and right, conservative and progressive, or liberal and populist, but between the city of God and the city of Man. Christopher Watkin references Ed Stetzer to argue we are witnessing "the 'rebellion against the rebellion,' the counterinsurgency of the city of God against the earthly city which, itself, is a rebellion against God's original rule."⁵

5 Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 481.

Our king and kingdom are not of this world. Yet at the same time the gospel calls us to partake in the messy business of political life as a direct testament to the kingdom to come, and a challenge to the politics of the earthly city.

This relativises our political allegiances, for our king and kingdom are not of this world. Yet at the same time the gospel calls us to partake in the messy business of political life as a direct testament to the kingdom to come, and a challenge to the politics of the earthly city.

What am I to expect from politics?

All in politics have a vision of the good life, even if it's half-baked or ill-conceived. Kaitlyn Schiess writes, "the orientation of all people, communities, and institutions is toward some end: we are living and working and creating toward a vision of where the world is headed."⁶ The question then is not if you have an end, but what is your end?

For believers redeemed by the gospel, it is the biblical story which ought to animate our political imagination, our vision of what is good, and our political expectations, our end. The Bible speaks of just such an end, a kingdom in which all is made new. Perhaps harder is living in light of that end.

Nonetheless, Watkin argues, we must, for "[t]he church is a forward-living, eternity-anticipating, hopeful and prophetic community, a city on the hill in the overlap of the 'now' and the 'not yet' witnessing to the present world as the first fruits of the new world."⁷

Our expectations of politics are therefore to be limited. Politics can do some good, but not ultimate good, for we are not yet in the city of God. However, this is no reason for the believer to give up in their earthly work, after all Titus reminds us to "be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always gentle towards everyone" (Titus 3:1-2).

Christian, "do not put your trust in princes, in human beings who cannot save". Do not lose heart because politics can be better, indeed, should be better. There is a hope that will never perish, spoil or fade (Ps 146:3).

Tom Kendall is Strategic Assistant to the CEO at CARE.

6 Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Our Neighbour* (Downers Grove, ILL: IVP, 2020), 170-1.

7 Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, 478.



The UK General Election

ENCOURAGEMENTS AND CHALLENGES FOR EVANGELICALS

ROSS HENDRY

The dust has now settled on the UK General Election. A new Parliament has begun with 350 of the total 650 members of parliament new to the green benches of the House of Commons. The Labour Party has a majority of 411, with the next largest party, the Conservatives on 122 – the lowest number of MPs they have returned in modern times.

There is little sentimentality in politics; honeymoons are short-lived, and history is quoted and used selectively. But we should pause for thought on a few significant encouragements and challenges to emerge during the campaign. I want to suggest six for us to reflect on and pray into.

THE ENCOURAGEMENTS

1 Moments of civility and grace, although rare, were apparent at key junctions in the campaign. We should give thanks and celebrate these. Both Rishi Sunak's speech on departing Downing Street and Kier Stammer's upon his arrival, were standouts in their graciousness and generous tone and content. But perhaps the loveliest example was that of former Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt's daughters, who left a note for Kier Stammer's children on navigating life in Downing Street. Perhaps an example of the young teaching the old how to behave (Eph 4:29; Col 3:13).

2 "Resetting politics" was on the winning side. The new Prime Minister made "resetting politics" a central part of his campaign, arguing politics ought to be orientated around principles of service and integrity. We must never be deluded into thinking there was a golden age in politics, but neither should we ignore the reality that standards in public life, especially at the very top of government, have declined significantly in the last seven years. We should grieve this and be first amongst those to support and encourage the importance of high standards in public office (Phil 2:3-7; Rom 13:4).

3 There are newly elected Christian MPs across all the main political parties. This is an important and wonderful characteristic of UK politics. As a number of biblical positions on social issues become increasingly difficult to hold openly, we must welcome the arrival of fellow believers and work to maintain an authentic Christian voice across the political spectrum.



THE CHALLENGES

4 A lack of vision for the common good combined with “message discipline” led to many important topics being ignored or avoided during the campaign. However, this does not mean that topics like assisted suicide, freedom of religious belief and speech, or gender identity will not be discussed or even legislated over the next five years. Similarly, many parties wanted to deny any link to an “ideology,” preferring to emphasise their technocratic credentials and pragmatism. We should seek and support good government, but also desire to know what kind of country our government strives to create, and how that compares to God’s vision for our flourishing (Prov 29:18).

5 Abuse, threats, intimidation, and falsehood were alarmingly widespread during the campaign. Beyond milkshakes being thrown at Nigel Farage were other alarming stories of deep fake videos, violence against property, and threats to candidates’ personal safety. This was often linked to the issues of immigration and the Israel-Gaza conflict. We have a role to play as peacemakers and speaking out against such actions that, no matter the strength of feeling, are never justified.

6 Turnout was low. Only 52% of the adult population voted – that is the lowest turnout since universal suffrage was introduced in 1928. Christians should vote and take our responsibility and privilege to do so seriously. There are many biblical reasons why it is important for us to be politically and biblically literate. The Bible does not advocate for any one form of government or political system, but we should seek to uphold democracy and democratic institutions as the best means of safeguarding many of our rights as citizens.

In the aftermath of the election many political commentators suggested that the result reflected the defeat for the Conservative Party more than a victory for Labour, and the new volatility of the electorate who over the last two elections seem to have shown their ability to shed tribal loyalties. Both these trends offer challenge and opportunity in equal measure, and it is good for us to meditate on our relationship with our new authorities as we seek to be faithful in respecting and honouring government leaders (Rom 13:7); submitting ourselves to the government and obeying its laws (Rom 13:1–5; 1 Pet 2:13–14); and praying for our political leaders (1 Tim 2:1–2).

Ross Hendry is CEO of the social policy charity CARE (Christian Action Research and Education).

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Silence is Not an Option

A Letter to the Global Church about the Genocide in Gaza

MENA PRN



The Peace and Reconciliation Network (PRN) is a World Evangelical Alliance commission with regional and national teams throughout the world who work to inspire, equip and connect Christians so every disciple, church, and alliance exists as a centre of reconciliation.

From the Director of KLC:

The attacks of October 7 – occurring not in a vacuum but in the context of some fifty-seven years of occupation, fourteen years of siege, and multiple wars – and the subsequent devastation of Gaza have been a source of agony for some/many of us in the West. It is very hard to secure an accurate number of those who have been and are being killed in Gaza. An article in The Lancet from 5 July 2024 estimates that “Applying a conservative estimate of four indirect deaths per one direct death to the 37396 deaths reported, it is not implausible to estimate that up to 186 000 or even more deaths could be attributable to the current conflict in Gaza.”¹

Many of us hoped and expected that our Western governments would take seriously the findings of the ICJ in the case brought against Israel by South Africa: “54. In the Court’s view, the facts and circumstances mentioned above are sufficient to conclude that at

least some of the rights claimed by South Africa and for which it is seeking protection are plausible. This is the case with respect to the right of the Palestinians in Gaza to be protected from acts of genocide and related prohibited acts identified in Article III, and the right of South Africa to seek Israel’s compliance with the latter’s obligations under the Convention.”² Alas, it appears that international law is fine when it supports “our” side but not when it goes against it. This bodes ill for our geopolitical future and has been devastating for Gaza.

At our recent KLC Annual Conference in June we had some discussion of the terrible situation in Gaza. A wise suggestion from one participant was that we do well to listen to the voices of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East. What follows is a searing letter to the global church from just such brothers and sisters, which we are privileged to publish.

Craig G. Bartholomew

¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01169-3/fulltext#%20](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01169-3/fulltext#%20).

² <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203447>.

The Peace and Reconciliation Network of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region expresses a deep concern about the noticeable disparity in the Global Church's discourse on the crises in Ukraine and Gaza. While the Western Christians and the Global Church have called for direct mobilization of resources and demonstrated a strong, explicit stance on Ukraine, its discourse on Gaza has been significantly less prominent and less explicit. This difference in response for us, your brothers and sisters in the MENA region, is not only stark but also emotionally deeply disconcerting. The urgent and visceral reactions to the situation in Ukraine are not mirrored in the discourse on Gaza, despite both regions facing severe humanitarian crises. The silence or subdued approach to Gaza is unjust and overlooks a significant ongoing tragedy.

To provide a broader context, the specific injustice in Gaza involves the mass killing of people who have no means to defend themselves or raise their voices. Gazans are being targeted by a regional superpower, supported by a global superpower. This action by the Israeli government has been qualified by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as a "plausible genocide." The situation in Gaza amounts to collective punishment, where people are being deprived of necessities such as food, water, and medicine – a form of domicide, rendering Gaza uninhabitable.

This crisis occurs against the backdrop of an occupation that has persisted since 1967. Moreover, 85% of Gaza's population consists of people displaced since 1948, meaning the majority of Gaza's residents are not originally from Gaza. There have been minimal efforts to address and correct this longstanding injustice.

"Our silence ... discredits a long history of great work done by early Protestant missionaries in the MENA, Christians who laboured to present Evangelicals as ambassadors of human dignity, liberation, and who built bridges with Arabic culture and contributed to its development."

The emotions generated by this situation are profound: anger, frustration, despair, and loss. These emotions raise a critical question – how can the church maintain a consistent and just witness across the MENA region when its silence makes it appear complicit in fostering these emotions? The church's perceived complicity in this injustice tarnishes its moral standing and witness. It is crucial for the church to recognize and name this injustice. Acknowledging and addressing the suffering of the Gazan people is essential for upholding the church's integrity and moral authority. Only through consistent advocacy for all oppressed communities can the church truly embody its commitment to justice and compassion.

Furthermore, we observe a double standard that diminishes our witness as ambassadors of Christ to his gospel of peace and reconciliation, widening the gulf between Muslims and Christians, especially Evangelicals, both locally and globally. Even longstanding friends no longer wish to associate with us, Evangelicals in particular, as a result of our perceived complicity in violence and oppression.

The cost of not speaking out is far higher than speaking imperfectly; if we do not address violence, it can breed more violence and spill across the region. Our silence not only harms our witness to Christ but discredits a long history of great work done by early Protestant missionaries in the MENA, Christians who laboured to present Evangelicals as ambassadors of human dignity, liberation, and who built bridges with Arabic culture and contributed to its development. Now, we are witnessing such a great heritage being lost as modern-day Arabs, even those aware of





our good history, see us as standing on the side of those supporting killing and war in the name of God.

Notably, the attackers of October 7th are likely those who lost their families in current and previous Gaza conflicts. *God will hold us accountable for not helping the "least of these" as highlighted in Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31.* We have become numb to violence, ignoring cries for help, and failing the people of Gaza and other Palestinians long before October 7th. Arab Evangelicals fear speaking out to avoid offending American and European donors. *The blood of our Gazan brothers and sisters in humanity cries out to us.*

The siege and occupation of Gaza needs to end. This would serve the best interests of hostages, their families, and the Israelis. We recognize the suffering of Israelis during the October 7 attack, and we recognize their humanity, made in the image of God, which is decaying due to the moral bankruptcy of the occupation. We call for nonviolence on all sides; both Palestinians and Israelis deserve a safe, secure, and dignified home. The kingdom of God cannot break through if injustice is yoked with military power and economic oppression. The good news must truly be good news.

Scripture repeatedly commands us to care not only for the orphan and the widow but also for our enemy and neighbor. Light emerges from darkness, as seen in the Palestinian Christian tradition of Holy Light, on Easter Saturday, where light scatters darkness and reveals what is hidden. The Holy Spirit unites us as members of the Body of Christ; when one of us suffers, we all suffer. We long for our brothers and sisters in Gaza to experience the fullness of Salam/Shalom/Peace.

**"The Holy Spirit
unites us as members
of the Body of Christ;
when one of us suffers,
we all suffer."**

We yearn for a time when eyes will see, ears will hear, and hearts will empathize with the heart of God, who hears the cries of those who suffer unjustly. We need discernment to recognize wrongdoing. Revelation 20 and 21 speak of nations, not just one nation, coming into the City of God. God cares about all nations, not just Israel. The work of Christ reconciles all things to himself: God, each other, and all creation. Salam/Shalom encompasses justice, reparation, and the judgment of evil empires and evildoers.

We call upon the Global Church to the following actions:

- We call for the community of God to lament our inaction and inability to break the cycle of violence and destruction in Gaza.
- We urge the wider community of God to act, calling on those in power to act justly and end the violence, paving the way for a lasting and just peace.

We must confront the forces of hate and injustice by speaking out and taking actions that promote change in unjust systems and situations.

Silence is not an option; where we have been silent, fearful, or supportive of violence, we must repent as Christians. We seek partnership with congregations and Christian bodies willing to join us in challenging systems and structures of injustice. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Peacemaking is action, not just words, and will involve risk, persecution, and intense labor. When we commit to this together, we witness to Christ and will be called the children of God.

Relationships It's all about the Economy

DAVID ANDREW

“A slew of studies has shown that feeling supported and loved can help protect you from common conditions, including diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, stroke and heart attack ... In the workplace, good relationships are linked with greater creativity and job satisfaction – and a lower risk of burnout.”¹

These findings, reported by David Robson in *New Scientist*, should come as no surprise to Christians, who believe that human beings are created in the image of the Trinitarian God. Relationships are intrinsic to who God is, and so we should expect them to be equally fundamental to human flourishing. If we can accept the stipulations of the Old Testament law as in some sense God’s blueprint for the Good Society (albeit a late bronze age agrarian version of the Good Society), then it is surely significant that Jesus summed up the requirements of that law with the twin commands to love God and to love our neighbour. Because love is all about relationships. And yet relationships are virtually invisible in most political discourse.

Sadly, however, that is not because relationships are unaffected by political choices, nor because relational realities do not impinge on political issues – far from it. Most of the problems with which public policy has to grapple have their roots in poor quality relationships – between individuals, between communities, between organisations, or between some combination of these. This is true in areas as diverse as economic productivity, law and order, physical and mental health, or the need for and provision of welfare and other public services. Equally, political policies formulated without reference to their impact on relationships (at all levels) too often have the unintended consequence of undermining and degrading relationships — thereby exacerbating the problems they were designed to fix, or creating new problems in other areas.

These insights form the basis of a fresh approach to political questions, pioneered by the Jubilee Centre in



Edvard Munch, *The Heart* (1898–99)

Cambridge, UK, and a number of associated organisations. Deeply rooted in Scripture, its focus on relationships nonetheless provides a language, analysis and agenda which can resonate with people of any or no explicit faith,² because of the way it “goes with the grain” of human nature and provides “a demonstrably plausible account of human flourishing”³ – as the quotation at the head of this article indicates.

The Relationist is a small website coming out of this stable, which aims to build and nurture an international community of people committed to making the relational dimension explicit

in all areas of life, both public and private. Such “Relationists” will ask questions about how existing practices or new proposals either promote or undermine relationships – and how they (often only implicitly) depend on relationships. They will seek to understand a range of issues from a relational perspective: what relationships are involved in them or affected by them, how those relationships could be improved, and what difference better relationships would make. And they will prompt others to pay attention to relationships too, rather than simply ignoring them.

We would love to welcome members of the KLC community to join us – to be stimulated in their thinking, and to contribute their own relational insights through our blog. Please register at <https://the-relationist.net/contact-us/> to be kept up to date with new posts.

David Andrew is Editor of The Relationist Website and blog, and an Anglican minister.

¹ *New Scientist* 1 June 2024, p.40 (online at <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg26234933-100-these-scientific-rules-of-connection-can-supercharge-your-social-life/>).

² See, for example, John Ashcroft et al., *Understanding, Managing and Measuring Stakeholder Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³ Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda and Strategy for Christian Social Reform* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), 31.

NATIONALISM

THE DOMINANT WORLD RELIGION



JAMES W. SKILLEN

Consider with me a sketch of the historical background.

With the rise to social and cultural dominance by the Roman Catholic Church in the High Middle Ages a comprehensive Western European Christendom was established. Civil governments acknowledged the church's moral and religious authority above them. Christendom was a church-dominated realm.

When the modern state began to take shape around the time of the Reformation and during the centuries that followed, churches became more like co-partners with state governments. Some of the new states did establish churches in their territorial realms while other states continued to look to the Catholic Church or to papal authority for authorization. But by the 19th century most established churches were becoming less influential in public life and were accommodating themselves to a place in society as one among many non-government institutions alongside universities, business enterprises, trade groups, and scientific research operations. States thus became the dominant organizers of society and absorbed much of the authority once held by the church. Modern states became territorial, government-dominated communities that monopolized the use of force and organized every resident under the rule of monarchs or the rule of a basic law.

This was the context in which national identities rose to importance. Many of the states were referred to as

nation-states, which assumed that the state was to serve the *nation*, typically identified as a people with a common social, cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage. Common schools were established in many countries to teach children their national histories as well as maths, reading, and standards of morality. The moral standards were typically derived from their cultural heritage even if the schools were not organized and run by churches. In the United States, which disestablished the church, the moral standards were the cultural heritage of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) majority.

The most important cultural revolution in Western Europe after the Reformation has been called the Enlightenment (18th and early 19th centuries), which fostered a new faith in rationality, freedom, prosperity, and self-determination. At its most radical, the Enlightenment contributed to the French Revolutionaries' cry, "Neither God nor master," directed at the prevailing authority of the church and the aristocracy. The Enlightenment's aim was to free people from bondage to the myths and oppression of those older institutions. That required displacing Christianity in favor of a new religion of human autonomy to be realized through the progress of science.

Between the time of the American and French Revolutions (1776 and 1789, respectively) and the demise of the major European empires during the period between World War I and the late 1900s, nationalism rose to prominence throughout much of the world. Love of and

Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851)



service to the *nation*, with all that liberated people can achieve, has now gained dominance above churches and states. In much of the world where people have a voice and enjoy a meaningful degree of freedom, they no longer live in church-dominated or state-dominated societies. If they are free to practise a Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Jewish faith, it is typically exercised as a private institutional matter.

The clearest manifestation of this nationalistic development that I know of as a US citizen is the centrality of WASP nationalism that motivated the majority of the people from the time of America's revolutionary start to the 1960s. It is nothing less than a *civil-religious nationalism* to which governments and churches have been culturally subordinate. Famed British author G.K. Chesterton commented in 1922 that America is "the only nation in the world founded on a creed." American historian Sidney Mead titled his 1975 book, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church*. It is not the Constitution's institutions of government that American politicians have in mind when they say, "God bless America," or when the people celebrate the Fourth of July. Government is a mere means to the end of advancing the American *nation*.

That sense of American identity accentuates the article of faith that the people are sovereign and the government is their servant. Political candidates for state and federal offices of government ask voters what they want and then pledge to "deliver the goods" for them in order to win their vote. Something similar has been increasing in the practice of many churches that want to recruit more members. They take surveys in neighborhoods to find out what people want from a church and then shape the church's offerings to try to attract those people.

The origin of America's *civil-religious* nationalism goes back to the Puritan colonists who settled "New England" in the 1600s and modeled themselves and their colony after the biblical Exodus story: courageous Puritans, pledging covenantal troth to God, took their exodus from oppression in Britain (Egypt), crossed the Red Sea of the Atlantic, and entered a new Promised Land where they would build a City on a Hill to serve as a light to all nations.

In the decades to come that story became influential throughout the thirteen colonies, undergirding the rallying cry of the Revolution that the people — the American nation — should gain their independence from the British



François-Auguste Biard, *Bust-Length Study of a Man* (1848)

Crown and parliament. The not-yet-politically-reconstituted people identified themselves as God's chosen *nation*, a new Israel, and a light to the nations. The language of that self-interpretation was clearly a *religious* declaration, the creed of a nation not of a church. Moreover, the divinity in that founding myth is *America's god*, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, the Christ.

What most Americans of European descent do not realize is that the reality behind this WASP civil-religious founding myth provoked the creation of a second, counter interpretation of the same biblical Exodus story. Long before the Revolution of 1776, the slaves had begun to sing songs of suffering and of hope for liberation. After the Declaration of Independence was drafted, the slaves latched on to its affirmation that all people are created equal. Quite obviously, their telling of the story directly countered the WASP telling. The exodus from slavery would have to take place within the Egypt of America. The Pharaoh was the slave owner, not a foreign monarch. The promised land would be this land after its reconstitution in tune with the Declaration of Independence when all people are treated equally under the law and can live together in freedom.

The divinity in that founding myth is *America's god*, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, the Christ.

One can see from this brief sketch how deeply religious the competition between these two belief systems has been from the time of the Revolution to our day. The WASP myth dominated the culture and politics; the

songs of the slaves and post-war Blacks were sung under oppression, praying for a future liberation. But after the civil-rights reforms of the 1960s, the first civil-religious myth lost its taken-for-granted dominance. The struggle between mutually exclusive ideals of what America should be intensified, generating hot and angry culture wars. Rumbling, gurgling magma was rising toward a volcanic eruption that started with the election of a black president, Barak Obama, and exploded further when Donald Trump was welcomed by a large minority spouting his ugly reinterpretation of WASP civil-religious nationalism. He promised to recover the original America that had been stolen by the evil, un-American, anti-American left.

To whatever extent the two civil-religious exodus stories have been clouded and twisted, and regardless of how much the arguments over racism, abortion, gender identity, the climate crisis, immigration, gun possession, and more have been turned into weapons of political conflict, the mounting antagonism is not merely emotional, academic, linguistic, or economic. It is a battle for control of the power to define the American *nation's* identity in relation to its god.

The major involvement of many so-called Evangelicals in a movement called "Christian nationalism," is just one evidence of the failure of Christians to live by and understand biblical faith. Biblically speaking, Christianity is a way of life that manifests allegiance to Christ's supremacy over all things throughout the world – politics, economics, family life, and science/technology included. There is no biblical justification for adopting false gods to justify

the practice of civil-religious nationalism, which many Christians believe fits hand-in-glove with Christianity.

The engagement of Christians in politics should begin with repentance from all civil-religious nationalisms and the encouragement of a modest patriotism. Christian civic engagement must acknowledge government's high calling before God to establish and uphold public justice. Government is not a mere means to the end of nationalist ambitions. The just and fitting actions of governments are among the most important expressions of God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The actions of Christ's followers are to be like that of God who sends rain and sunshine on the just and unjust alike (Matt 5:43-48). In this age of God's patient rule through Christ, the good grain and the weeds must be allowed to grow up together until the Lord decides it is time to separate them (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43). Any nationalism of exclusion is unbiblical. All vengeance-taking is anathema (Rom 12:17-21; 13:1-4). Upholding public justice means guarding against and overcoming public injustice. That is the proper divide that public laws and their enforcement should uphold, not the divide between one group of citizens against another.

James W. Skillen co-founded and directed the Center for Public Justice from the late 1970s to 2009. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including The Good of Politics; In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations; and Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community. He and his wife Doreen live in Birmingham, Alabama.





Jesus and World Plutocratic Government

ALAN STORKEY

BIG AND SMALL

Big-picture arguments can strike us as sweeping, simplistic and elementary when our thinking should be complex, respond to different data sets and see all aspects of an issue. But this is not always the case. There are elephants in the room – things so big and so near us that we fail to see them. Our insistence on complexity may in fact be a grubbing of trivia to avoid the big problem. As Jesus said, “You strain at gnats and swallow camels” (Matt 23:24). When you stand back, that is what we do, every day. We intensely discuss Gaza as though it is the only war when there have been 200 big wars since 1900 all resulting from the same process, costing 200 million human lives and \$1,000,000,000,000,000. Yet we do not discuss the big picture. In the UK, we discuss Angela Raynor perhaps not paying £1,500 on a house transfer when Tories have pocketed billions on dodgy public sector deals.

Often, as scientists know, a local scientific theory forms part of a bigger picture, and most scientists more or less believe in one big picture. Jesus – when he taught people who, like us, were slow to understand – focused on the big pictures, often using small images. The prodigal son is the human race. The one pearl is the government of God. The seed in the weeds is the kingdom of God choked by worry and deceit. One of Jesus’ big pictures is wealth.

He spoke of it in every which way. In Matthew 23 Jesus unmasks the greed and self-indulgence of the political establishment. When the Temple was destroyed in 70AD there was so much gold in it that the price of gold halved throughout the eastern Mediterranean. The love of wealth is perhaps the biggest problem in world history,

but perhaps it is small. “Show me the coin,” Jesus said before denying its status as a token of ultimate authority.

WEALTH AND FASCIST POWER

We call ourselves democratic, but really at all the key times since 1900 wealth has ruled. Wealth and military power had created empires for Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Russia, Austro-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and the Japanese. WW1 disrupted the imperial dispensation. Marx was right: capitalists were exploiting workers everywhere. The Russia of Fabergé eggs failed, was devastated by WW1 and rebelled into the USSR. Our ally became our enemy because of the Revolution and the danger to capitalism.

The West hid, successfully, many of the failures of the rich, of plutocratic rule. They were enormous.

We can look at the British: the Boer Wars and concentration camps, the long looting of India or the hundred-year humiliation of China through the sale of addictive opium. We can look at the violent treatment of Native Americans or the cruel subjugation of Africa and South America. The long history of the rich corrupting the world – the march into modernity – was called civilisation, but it was part fiction.

**The deal
was clear. The rich
fund militarism to
control the system and
the militarists defend
the rich against the
workers and
socialism.**

The rich had a problem. The workers were being exploited, but were wising up through education, success in emerging industries, travel, political activism, the teachings of Christianity and having to fight the quarrels of the rich. Gradually, the lazy rich were getting exposed

Félix Vallotton, *The Protest* (1893)



and did not want to share the fate of Russian aristocrats. And so, mainly out of fear, they linked up with militarism in world-wide fascism. The deal was clear. The rich fund militarism to control the system and the militarists defend the rich against the workers and socialism. Fascism was spreading around the globe.

HITLER AND WWII WAS THE RESULT, NOT THE PROBLEM

Fascism was everywhere holding the workers at bay. It ran the show in Italy, was strong in France, Portugal, Spain (after the Civil War), in Japan, the UK and in the States. Few have heard of the business-fascist plot to oust Roosevelt in 1934. But, of course, it all came together in Hitler. He was war-traumatized, beat up socialists, and was bizarrely funded by Henry Ford at first and then by Fritz Thyssen, one of the richest Germans. After the Wall Street Crash the need for Hitler was acute and he was popular among the rich in Britain and the States. We blank out the fact that US firms gave Hitler a full range of weapons factories. The US Ambassador, William Dodd, reported to Roosevelt in October 1936 that more than a hundred

US companies were arming Hitler and were not allowed to take earnings out except in goods.

Then the Tory fascist sympathizers at Munich gave Hitler a further massive arms cache with Czech weapons and the great Skoda arms factory. And so WWII came because the West armed Hitler and spurned a coalition with the USSR. Aside from Churchill, most of the Tories in the late 1930s backed Hitler. Even in May 1941 Rudolf Hess flew over still hoping to hold together a UK/Nazi coalition. But war has its own dynamic.

PUTTING TOGETHER HIDDEN FASCISM AFTER 1945

Japan's attack at Pearl Harbour meant the US had to fight Hitler. Roosevelt had faced strong business opposition to fighting the Nazis. Hitler attacked the USSR, the Communist enemy, in June 1941. Despite Pearl Harbour and the entrance of the US into the war in December 1941, the USSR was used to bear the brunt of the fighting and for defeating the Nazis – three full years of fighting. They suffered the loss of 25 million lives in the worst of the fighting, while the US and UK lost half a million each. The creation of the Second Front was delayed until it was easy for the Western allies; Churchill made sure of that. Then suddenly the US/UK had “won the War,” dumped their ally and backed a new fascist militarism against the USSR and then China to retain Western capitalist/plutocratic world control. Within weeks of the USSR effectively winning the war for us, she became the new enemy and the reason for “necessary” military dominance. There was no effort at peace. There was no Marshall aid for the USSR, and the McCarthyite era and another Red Scare kept the communists bad and capitalists good.

THE LONG FALSE NARRATIVE

The long post-WWII story, under the guise of democracy and freedom, has really been a continuation of the same story. Since the end of the war in the US, and since 1951



in the UK, capitalism has been in charge. From empire we moved to multinational companies controlling resources through military alliances, whether in the Congo or the oil states. We got rid of democratically elected Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran because oil profits were more important than democracy. War profits were more important than people in Vietnam. The bullying dictator Saddam Hussein was our friend, then a useful enemy. When Jimmy Carter attacked militarism, he had to go. While Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan loosened controls over international capitalism, money went off-shore – we do not know where, whose or how much – and secretly money ruled the world, with weapons to guarantee control.

Of course, there is a myth for the masses. Always an enemy is needed. The old appeals to nationalism, patriotism, fear, “greatness” and “democracy” are there to carry the masses into support. The Daily Mail, later Murdoch and the Sun, made sure that the working classes were entertained out of principled thought and solid political debate. The pattern that began with the fake Zinoviev telegram in the October 1924 election carried on. Elections that run on rubbishing, personality, blame, lies and selective statistics became the norm. Media propaganda dominated much news and real debate deteriorated. Political leaders like Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, Bush and Trump; or Thatcher, Blair, Cameron, Johnson and Truss grow on a money tree. They will keep the big money show on the road, even while democracy is being destroyed and consumer capitalism is ruining the planet. The rich have told us to spend, preferably on credit, to be ourselves, and this message dominates all others.

We face, or ignore, the fact that most of our politics has been smoke and mirrors. The capitalist West, now including Russia and China, exploits the planet’s resources and generates mass poverty while the rich rule. 2% of the world’s population own half the world’s wealth while half own only 2% of it. We arm states into military dictatorships, wage wars when we want, undermine the UN and seem bent on capitalist death-by-war-and-climate. But the reckoning is coming.

JESUS AND THE RECKONING

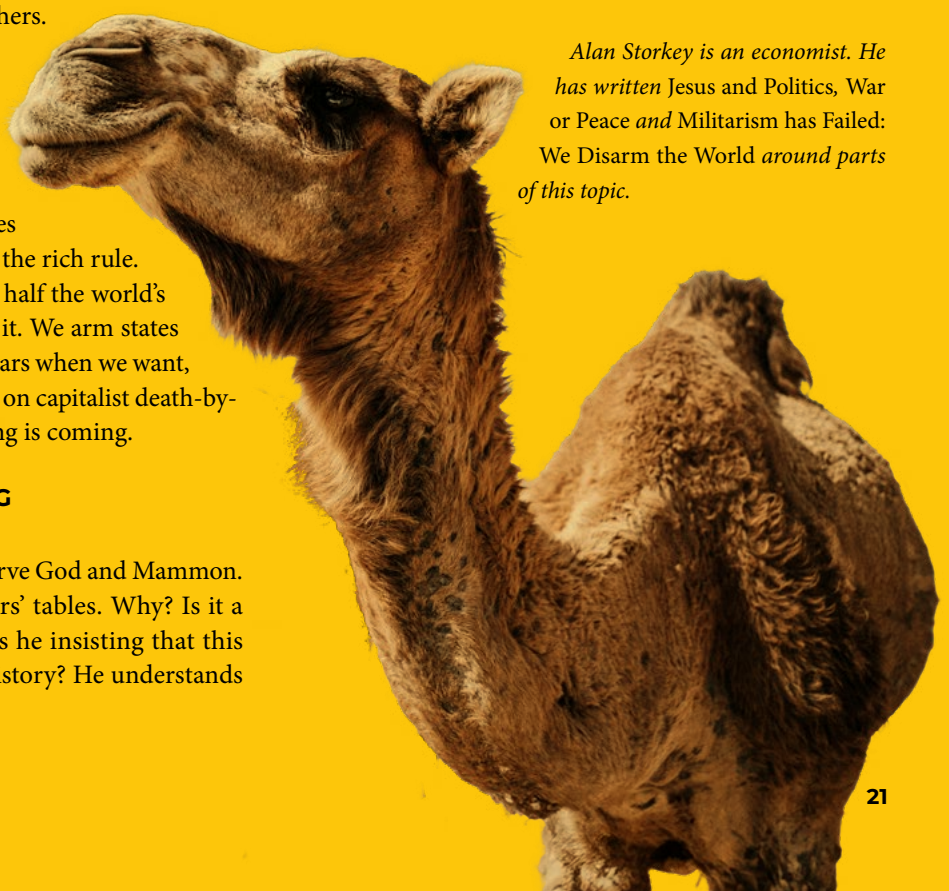
Jesus is rock firm: You cannot serve God and Mammon. He overturns the money-changers’ tables. Why? Is it a slightly embarrassing excess or is he insisting that this is the biggest problem in world history? He understands

it all. This is where evil grows. Money holds hands with corrupt power. This has not changed since Jesus’ time, except in scale. We need the politics of truth, the parties of faith, the end of nationalism, the contented economy, the support for the poor and sick, the end of weapons and conflict, nation speaking peace unto nation, fair wages, reduced consumption and the end of accumulated wealth. We need a principled revolution deeper than any envisaged by Marxism.

We need to hear Jesus. Do you see this camel? Well, every day you ignore it. It is called wealth. Look at the shape of the camel: it flies aircraft, wages war, burns energy, pursues luxury. It is extravagant. It buys us into debt, eats up resources, exploits anything. And it is driving global warming at a blinding speed. The reckoning is here – in the next ten years: global warming, denied for decades because it harmed profits, now causes destruction, drought and famine around the world. The mighty on their thrones are fighting one another and have committed to arms and devastation. There will be, unless we stop it, a cold war against China because she is an economic rival to the rich West. Trump, Putin, Netanyahu, Boris and their ilk sing the tune while secretly the oligarchs write the score. We are taught that wealth will be our salvation, while Jesus insists that the wealthy wait at the border for an entry permit to the kingdom of God. He urges us, see

the camel, not the gnat. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for the rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The gentle, meek Christ must and will rule. Yes, we hear you, Lord, and we will act.

Alan Storkey is an economist. He has written Jesus and Politics, War or Peace and Militarism has Failed: We Disarm the World around parts of this topic.





LANGUAGE MATTERS

EDUCATION IN A MULTILINGUAL WORLD

PAMELA MACKENZIE

Language is our primary method of communication. It is one of the most important ways to express cultural values, thoughts, ideas and enables the transmission of experiences, traditions, knowledge and values across generations. The language we speak and the community we are part of forms our identity and worldview. To value a language and culture means we are valued.

There are about 7,000 languages spoken around the world today, but languages are disappearing at an alarming rate and linguistic diversity is increasingly threatened. When a language disappears, an entire cultural and intellectual heritage disappears with it. The loss of language is almost always accompanied by social and cultural disruptions and can contribute to psychological trauma. Minority and indigenous groups make up the majority of endangered languages and as many have lost, or had their traditional livelihoods reduced; education, intended to help find new ways, has actually contributed to this demise.

Language and education

Two-thirds of the world's children grow up in multilingual environments. However, an estimated 40% do not have access to education in a language they speak or understand. Children from minority and indigenous language communities are thereby forced to abandon their first language when they go to school and try, often unsuccessfully, to learn in a language they barely understand. Children neither learn their own language and culture well, nor are they able to succeed in the new language or fit into the wider culture.

This deficit impacts all aspects of life and results in a lack of self-worth, value and significance.

Where children are attempting to learn in an unknown language there are high dropout and low achievement levels, a failure in achieving national goals and a loss of human resource. It is accompanied by increased social discrimination and marginalisation resulting in non-participation of the community. The inclusion of girls is especially impacted and there is a high economic and social cost in attempting to address the high dropout rates. Where mother tongues are ignored, intergenerational divisions increase as children are further removed from their language and culture.

The UN Convention on the rights of the child states that *“every child has the right to an education that enables him/her to fulfil their ... potential”*. To force children to learn in a language not their own is a social, political and personal injustice; it violates children's linguistic, cultural and individual rights. So what can be done to ensure that in a child's most vulnerable years they have access to an appropriate education and a positive learning environment, where every child is treated with respect, feels of worth and is valued?

Mother-tongue-based multilingual education

We know that children learn best from a familiar starting point. We know that continuity between home and school is important. We know that children feel secure in a learning environment where the content is rooted in the context of the culture and environment and, of course, where the language is known and understood. All of this improves children's educational experience, increasing access, quality, duration of schooling and learning outcomes.

For many years now, it has been understood that an education programme which starts in the mother tongue improves access to and inclusion in education for minority and indigenous language communities. The classroom becomes an inviting and responsive place where the child's experience is reflected in the learning process. Second and other languages are introduced gradually

building on the language and concepts already learned in the mother tongue.

This improves retention and learning; dropout rates decrease and academic results increase. Learning first in their mother tongue provides a strong foundation that means children can make an effective transition to national and international languages. Fluency and understanding in all areas across all languages increases.

It encourages parents to be more involved in their children's learning along with more community participation in education. It provides a sense of identity and maintains a connection with home, culture and community. Marginalised communities retain their linguistic and cultural identities. Improved skills mean more access to job opportunities and involvement in both local and wider communities. Overall, it is a more efficient use of resources, saving time and money for teachers and administrators over the mid to long term.

What is needed to build a sustainable multilingual programme?

It takes an enormous effort over a long period of time with a lot of collaboration between government, academic institutions, NGOs and communities to build strong and sustainable mother-tongue-based multilingual programmes. Many countries have multiple minority languages and the task often seems overwhelming, but where the effort has been made, the results have been worth it.

- Language documentation is an essential first step. Socio-linguistic surveys and scripting a language requires the help of linguists in collaboration with the community. Alphabets, dictionaries and spelling guides, once developed, need local approval to be used for developing written materials for the curriculum.
- A great deal of advocacy will be required to gather the support and cooperation of stakeholders in order to change policies and practices.
- A robust policy needs to be in place. Countries may need encouragement to adopt such policies that promote mother-tongue education from early childhood, and develop strong multilingual programmes over the whole of schooling wherever possible.
- Part of that policy needs to focus on recruiting and training local teachers and community members competent in learners' mother tongues with ongoing support and professional capacity building.
- A commitment to invest in mother tongue education, with the allocation of dedicated funds will be needed, particularly in the early stages of development.
- A multilingual curriculum plan with quality teaching and learning materials in mother tongue and in second

and other languages based on local knowledge and environment will need to be prepared involving local knowledge keepers, storytellers and artists.

- Monitoring outcomes and evaluating the processes will help develop and strengthen the programme.
- In order to develop strong and sustainable multilingual programmes they need to be rooted in the educational systems of a country. Non-government programmes often serve as positive examples of good practice, but can rarely provide the wide-ranging needs of education long term.

The potential of multilingual education is enormous but there is still a lot to do to increase access to such an education for all minority language communities.

Having taken part in developing curriculum materials in a number of minority language communities, I have had the privilege of gaining insights into their knowledge of the world, understanding of their environment and ways of living. As stories, riddles, poems, art, crafts and games, history from those cultures were collected and documented in their language for the first time, they felt they had an identity, that their language and they themselves had some dignity in society. Their language, their stories, their songs, their dances, their riddles, and they themselves had an equal status to every other language and community.

Dr Pamela Mackenzie has worked in education research and training with national and international government and non-governmental organisations. She helped to set up and support successful large-scale mother-tongue-based multilingual education programmes among indigenous and minority language communities.



Koya children listening to a story being read in their classroom, in their own language for the first time. Andhra Pradesh, India.

Zechariah

PREACHING THE BIBLE FOR ALL ITS WORTH

THE BIG PICTURE

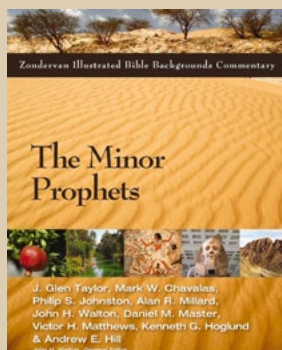


Persian fragment from Persepolis, 486–465 BCE (Minneapolis Institute of Art)

Zechariah's ongoing importance for the church is significant, yet often undervalued. Historically, it has been considered one of the more difficult prophetic books to interpret. Even Old Testament scholars at times throw up their hands, saying "I don't know what to do with Zechariah!" From the mysterious night visions in the opening chapters to the eschatological oracles of the closing chapters, interpretive challenges abound. For that reason, those in the church often limit their focus to the messianic texts quoted in the Gospels. But we have to remember that Zechariah, too, is God-breathed and useful for believers. Because of that, here are some top-level guidelines for preaching through this book and some helpful resources to help preachers prepare.

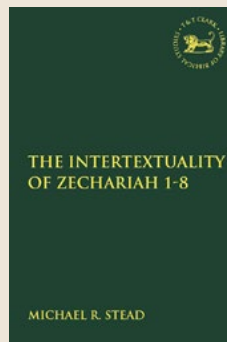
The first key to preaching through Zechariah is to focus on its Persian period, postexilic origins. This point may seem obvious. However, understanding the original context is crucial for this book in particular. Many people today are not familiar with Old Testament history beyond Moses or perhaps David. Helping our congregations to understand the Babylonian exile and the return to the land under Persian rule is key for understanding Zechariah's message. We can start by explaining the reasons behind the exile (idolatry and injustice), the theological

crisis this caused for God's people, and the hope they experienced when the Persian empire allowed those who chose to return to the land. Incorporating specific information about the exile itself can also help our audiences understand the book's ongoing relevance. They will see that while Zechariah points us to God's justice and the gravity of sin, it also shows us God's desire to restore his people and be in relationship with them. In other words, situating the book in its Persian context helps us see Zechariah's ongoing value beyond its prophecies about the first or second coming of Jesus. Those are important! But this prophetic book calls God's people to return to him following judgement. It provides instructions for what he expects of his people. And it paints a picture of what life in God's kingdom will ultimately look like. This final point gives our communities something that we can work towards today. Its true fulfillment may await Jesus' return, but that vision helps the church to see what God prizes.



The author of Zechariah assumed his audience knew about the exile and the reasons behind it, which is why developing that background knowledge is important. However, he also assumed that his audience would understand cultural and historical references. Resources such as Kenneth G. Hoglund and John H. Walton's "Zechariah" in the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

2009, 5:202–231) can provide the information needed to explain the book’s imagery and its key topics. For Zechariah, beyond assisting with the imagery, it discusses important topics such as temple building, prophets and their visions, relevant geography, the divine warrior motif, and more. This five-volume set is an invaluable tool for anyone who is trying to better understand the Old Testament.



The second key to preaching through Zechariah is to recognize its heavy use of and dependence on other Old Testament books. While actual quotations of these books are rare, the use of “sustained allusion” is much more common. Michael Stead (*The Intertextuality of Zechariah 1–8*. LHBOTS 506. [New York: T&T Clark, 2009]) provides a detailed exploration of these allusions in the first part of Zechariah. Understanding sustained allusions invites us to read (hear) these texts in the way an ancient audience thoroughly familiar with their Hebrew Scriptures would have. One example that Stead discusses involves Zechariah 1–2’s eight allusions to Lamentations 2. If we had grown up singing or listening to these laments, the visions of Zechariah 1–2 would evoke all of the ideas of Lamentations 2, not just particular verses. In other words, Zechariah does more than make eight brief allusions. Instead, the entire chapter of Lamentations 2 becomes the interpretive lens through which we understand Zechariah’s visions. In this case, Zechariah does not simply point to God’s provision for his people. He also highlights God’s reversal of Jerusalem’s destruction and the exile. While somewhat technical, Stead’s overall discussion gives helpful examples of both individual and sustained allusions and their implications for interpretation.

The third key to preaching Zechariah is to consider the book’s theme and how the individual sections support it. Broadly speaking, the book focuses on the restoration of God’s people. But we can narrow that theme further to the idea of return: “Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you” (Zech 1:3). Restoration comes as the Lord returns to Jerusalem and his people. However, God’s people must also return to him. The opening section (1:1–6) focuses on this call to return to God. The book then turns to a series of night visions and oracles in 1:7–6:15. Here, God announces his return to Jerusalem and punishment of Babylon. The seemingly mysterious imagery and pronouncements frequently draw on both other Old Testament texts and cultural concepts from the period. (While the interpretive keys described above may

have seemed obvious, here is where we see their payoff.) The third section, Zechariah 7–8, transitions to offering specific instructions about what it looks like for God’s people to return to him in response to his return. The final major section of Zechariah 9–14 includes two subsections that outline the results of the Lord’s return. The first subsection, Zechariah 9–11, concentrates on the way in which the Lord will deliver his people from internal and external oppression. He will also make them instruments of his justice. The second subsection, Zechariah 12–14, continues to develop the ideas of deliverance and the cleansing of God’s people. However, it goes further, highlighting the way in which foreign nations will join God’s chosen people in worshipping him.

Beyond the two resources mentioned above, the following may also prove useful as you prepare to preach Zechariah. Each volume includes bibliographies for additional resources on particular passages or topics:

Boda, Mark J. *Haggai, Zechariah*. NIVAC. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004.

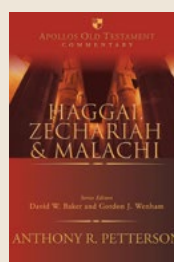
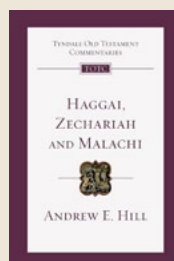
Boda is a key voice in Zecharian studies. This volume in the NIV Application Commentary series helpfully explores the original meaning and context of Zechariah. It also points out particular areas for contemporary application. Boda also has a more recent commentary on Zechariah alone, although it is quite a bit more technical: Boda, Mark J. *The Book of Zechariah*. NICOT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016.

Hill, Andrew E. *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*. TOTC 28. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.

Hill’s Tyndale Old Testament Commentary volume provides a concise discussion of individual verses while also pointing to the meaning of wider passages. He offers a solid and well-researched commentary that avoids getting bogged down in interpretive details.

Pettersen, Anthony R. *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*. ApOTC 25. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015.

Pettersen’s Apollos Old Testament Commentary offers a detailed discussion of key issues without focusing on the details of the Hebrew. His work includes discussions of the individual verses and explanations of the wider passages. This format is helpful since it enables the reader to get a top-level view that includes theological issues while also offering more detailed discussion when desired.





The Fault in Our Ballots

The Search for a Meaningful Politics

ZANE A. RICHER

The year is 2024. A Christian man enters a voting booth and stares at the two options before him. Both are deeply unsatisfying to him. In the solitude of that voting booth, a familiar struggle rages across his mind. *What should he do?* Part of him thinks it would be best to pick the party which comes “closest to his beliefs” – even though neither comes particularly close. But another part protests. Since there is no political organisation or platform which openly confesses Christ and his claims upon political life, it would be best to cast no ballot at all. Either way, he feels resigned to an evil act. But which is worse?

Sweat runs down his brow. *What should he do?*

The currency of late-modern democracy is the ability to reconcile oneself to making bad decisions. Most frequently, the guilt-debt of these accumulated decisions is expiated by homage paid not to principle but to necessity. In an ironic reversal of the old propaganda, we vote because we have no choice. Or so we tell ourselves. Faced with the calamity which awaits us if “the other side” gets in, what *reasonable* person could do otherwise? The apocalyptic mania which grips our leftward and rightward base is a symptom of guilty consciences crying for absolution; a bad option becomes less bad when viewed against the worst.

Of course, given the utilitarian calibration of the modern political conscience, we should not be surprised when the lesser of two evils slips unnoticed into the better of two goods. The activist and the average person might look different ways, but they meet each other back to back. In the face of an endless procession of morally compromising decisions, both plead the same justificatory fiction of necessity before the tribunal of conscience. Only the

partisan believes his own propaganda. What was for the ordinary person an uncomfortable and temporary truce with a bad conscience becomes for him a permanent alliance and moral crusade. Certainly, it is not unrelated that the vast surplus of political energy within the democratic process is reserved for those best able to reconcile themselves to successions of increasingly bad, yet comparatively better, decisions.

Thus, for partisans and ordinary persons alike, the experience of modern politics is one of constantly simmering and constantly self-medicating guilt bubbling up from a compounding record of bad decisions. For most people who are not activists – for most Christians especially – this accretion of guilt vents itself into feelings of profound alienation from the political realm – feelings which are only intensified as the behaviours of right and left become increasingly more erratic and visibly antinormative. Our lives are punctuated by moral catastrophes to which and from which we limp. The next

To be meaningful, our
choices – whatever
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election – “*the most important election of our lives*,” no doubt – looms ever ahead, dreaded and inescapable, a wound perpetually re-opened. The ballot box is a hungry god and must be fed.

Such a process of guilt recapitulation and reconciliation is articulable psychologically in terms of repression – though repression explained by St Paul not Sigmund Freud. According to the book of Romans, it is not the sex instincts which are repressed but the Truth – specifically, the truth of God as creator (Rom 1:18–32). In our case, this would be the truth of God as creator *of politics* (Rom 13:1), and the corresponding involvement of politics in the spiritual directedness of the life of the world, which centres in the human heart. Indeed, the Bible knows of no other power that can alienate one from *any* part of God’s creation – including politics – but sin. And sin implies opposition: a rejection of God and revolution against his creation-design (Ps 2:1–3). At the heart of the Bible’s revelation about humanity, then, is the disclosure of a radical (root-level) conflict raging between the power of sin introduced at the fall and the power of obedience secured through the redemption in Christ. This fundamental division between the *Civitas Dei* (the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ) and the *civitas terrana* (the kingdom of darkness) is therefore of central significance in Scripture. It has been described by the Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd as *the religious antithesis*: though humanity is one in its origin and structure, it is two in its destination and direction. Having all come from the same place, we are not all going the same way.

At the radical centre of human life, therefore, is not reason, emotion, economics, sexuality or politics but religion – one’s fundamental heart-response to the Word of God that created him. In the words of H. Evan Runner, “*life is religion*,” not in part but in its fullness. And this *life-which-is-religion* entails an all-decisive choice of allegiance: for Christ or against him in every aspect and sphere of created reality (Matt 12:30).

Until the last day, the validity of this choice may never be revoked, although it is often repressed. Human beings,

in their sinful apostasy from God, may so formulate their social, economic, ecclesiastical or political decisions in such a way that one spiritual allegiance is systematically excluded. This makes a false choice, both in the sense that (Christianly speaking) the remaining options are inadequate, but also in the sense that the choice itself is no longer *real*, no longer *meaningful*, no longer *existential*. To be meaningful, our choices – whatever surface issues they involve – must bottom out in the antithesis between faith in God and faith in idols. When one of these options is missing, the decision is removed – alienated – from the authentic and existential centre of human life.

You and I are living out our political existence in the wild and neurotic guilt-throes of just such a collective alienation. The democratic situation to which we have come rests upon a fund of repressions designed to winnow from the range of acceptable decisions any open consideration of



Paul Klee, *The Man of Confusion* (1939)

“religion,” any public theology. Consider, for instance, a sampling of our perennial political questions:

- Are people sovereign in their capacity as individuals (individualism) or in their capacity as a collective (collectivism)?
- Is the national community absolute in its claims upon human life (nationalism), or is the international community (internationalism)?
- Do human beings construct the norms for their political life *ex nihilo* from their own reason (liberalism), or piecemeal over a long process of accumulated custom and tradition (conservatism)?

In each case, an alternative is presented wherein either choice commits one to the root premise of mankind’s absolute autonomy in the political sphere. In no option is to be found the open confession of God as sovereign creator of politics who has laid down for it a law and a King to which are owed the obedience of faith.

Modern Christians are therefore correct to feel a deep sense of inarticulate ambivalence about taking up their positions – let alone their identities – within the collapsed dichotomy of decisions so formulated. A true answer cannot be given to a false question. The way out of an invalid choice is not to pick sides. Being false, such choices can only falsify the conscience of those who make them, alienating them further from the truth of human existence. Yet it is equally wrong for Christians to *embrace* this very alienation as *normative*, thereby turning their backs on politics altogether. It is not politics which has falsified us; it is we who falsified politics. The fault, dear believer, is not in our ballots but in ourselves.

This fault, which originates from an uncritical acceptance of false problems, is at least in part responsible for the rapid overheating of our political climate. When Christians accept the basic validity of false problems, and resign themselves – in conformity with the world – to the necessity of making bad decisions, they simultaneously reflect and reproduce the conditions of their own alienation. The guilt-

soaked conscience which emerges from these conditions demands the increasingly turbulent and neurotic set of justifications that underlie the twin development of polarisation and apathy.

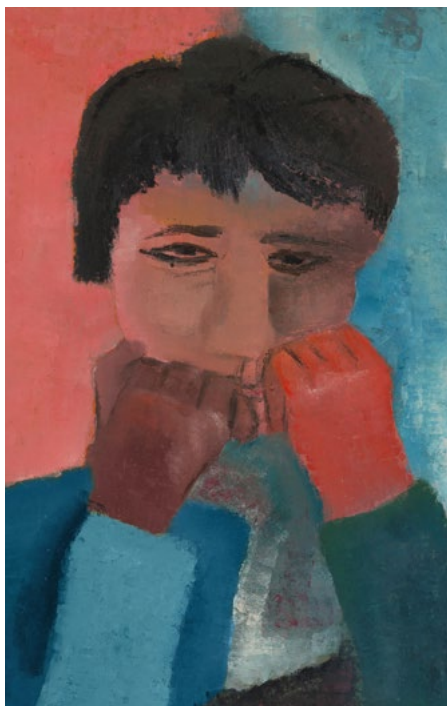
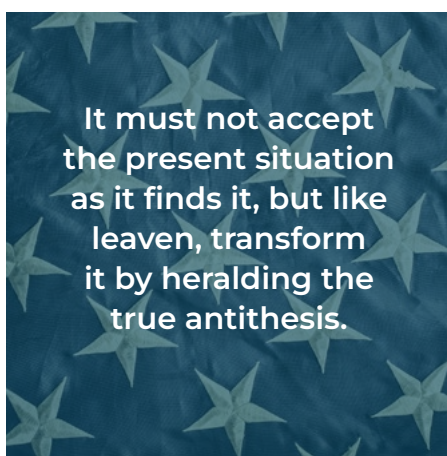
In such conditions, the obligation of the body of Christ is not to accept this dilapidated situation as is, but to reform it from within by asserting the principle which hitherto has been missing (repressed). It is a mistake to see in “the existing situation” a condition which is static and unalterable. The gospel of the kingdom which Jesus proclaims is not *stasis* but *dynamis* – an explosive power that propels society in a process of inner re-formation from out of its radical religious centre. It must not accept the present situation as it finds it, but like leaven, transform it by heralding the true antithesis. In this way, society as a whole – including political society – is revitalised by the ability to make a meaningful choice.

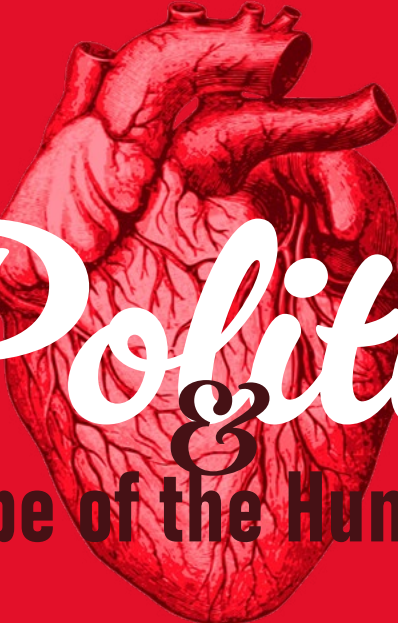
The reformulation of politics in light of the true antithesis represents a monumental task. It is a call to Christian people everywhere to take up – likely for the first time – our responsible stewardship for the political realm in the form of an organised public witness. Such a

thing cannot happen overnight. It will take much careful reflection upon both the foundations of the current crisis and the way forward. In these preliminary steps toward the establishment of a Christian political consciousness, I have been delighted to participate through KLC’s excellent new doctoral programme, studying the religious foundation of political polarisation. This work has taught me a powerful lesson: contrary to the world’s bleak prognostications, it is a thrilling time to be a Christian in politics. For, as is so often the case, the Lord’s healing comes in the form of a scalpel.

Its incisions, though painful, are not purposeless. Let us humbly submit to his chastisements, and rise to seek afresh in the political realm the goal assigned to us in our Lord’s petition: *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Zane serves as a Professor of Government at Liberty University, VA, where he received an MA in Public Policy. He is currently a member of KLC’s PhD programme, studying political fragmentation and polarisation, especially in the American context.





Politics & the Shape of the Human Heart

JOHN INAZU

*An Interview with Michael Wear, author of The Spirit of Our Politics:
Spiritual Formation and the Renovation of Public Life.*

John Inazu: Your new book is directed at Christians who are looking for guidance about how to engage in politics and public life. But it focuses a great deal on personal formation as well. What is the connection between the two?

Michael Wear: We can consider this from two directions. First, politics has to do with the social aspects of our life, as well as our thoughts, feelings and other aspects of who we are as people. If we are not thinking about the kind of people we are when it comes to politics, if our politics is not included in that which we want to see shaped into the likeness of Christ, then whole-life formation becomes impossible.

From the other direction, our democracy simply cannot get around the kind of people we are. The state of our politics is, in the end, a reflection of the state of our souls. The major structural problems we face, the social ills we decry and the injustices we oppose, are not separate from, but deeply related to, formation and the kinds of incentives and disincentives we the people provide for our politics.

JI: If you're right about the connection between personal formation and public engagement, then I'm not sure we'll see any meaningful shifts before the next presidential election. I see the dysfunction of modern evangelicalism as a matter of formation – it has unfolded over decades, and it will take decades to undo. Do you share my bleak assessment, or are you more optimistic?

MW: If we focus formation on outcomes we will miss the point. We are not aiming for behaviour modification

or presentation; those are not our chief objectives. We are seeking to become the kind of people who want the good of our neighbours in and through our politics. We are seeking to put all we do, including our political activity, under the jurisdiction of love. We can make significant progress in this area though it may not lead to a different immediate, short-term political outcome.

I worry that so much of the conversation about Christians and politics, even among Christians, is dictated by opinions about Donald Trump. *The Spirit of Our Politics* mentions Trump sparingly. We must move the centre of gravity in Christian conversations about politics, particularly in the context of the local church, to that of the orientation of our hearts. We will get to healthier political outcomes starting from the gospel as our centre, holding tightly to the gospel and, therefore, holding much more loosely to our political opinions and judgements.

JI: Your book relies heavily on the late Dallas Willard. How would you describe his work and its influence on your life?

MW: Dallas Willard changed my life. I read *The Divine Conspiracy* when I was a young White House staffer, and it was like a second spiritual awakening in my life. Willard saw Christianity as offering knowledge about reality that we can trust. We can base not only our hopes for what happens after we die in the gospel, but our hopes for what might happen today.

This book is very much my application of Willard's ideas to politics and I hope the book provides a new kind of

language, a new register, for Christians to think about politics, its place in relation to God's world and the kind of people we are becoming in and through our politics.

Jl: At one point in the book, you assert that “in a democracy, what wins constitutes its own kind of reality.” What do you mean by this claim, and what challenges or opportunities does it present for Christians?

MW: I understand this to be one of Dallas Willard's principal concerns about politics: its capacity to create its own reality. This is true in a very practical and material sense: if a bill is passed to criminalize something, the nature of that act is in some way changed by that very fact; if the government incentivizes something through a tax credit, the nature of our choice regarding that thing is different by that fact. However, more to Willard's point, I think, is the philosophical and imaginary power of politics. You do not have to be right in order to win in politics. Politics does not arbitrate *truth*, but *will*. Well, what happens when voters' will is oriented in a way that is harmful, or even just not ideal?

This really gets to the heart of my claim that the kind of people we are has much to do with the kind of politics we have. While our political systems and structures do not perfectly reflect and interpret the will of the people, in a fundamental sense, a democratic politics will legitimize and reinforce that which the people approve and allow. This creates a kind of reality – a sense of what is possible, a sense of what is acceptable – that we then have to live in and navigate. This can be for good or for ill.

Christians must have a vision that derives from outside of politics. Christians' sense of what is real must not be

determined by what is politically possible. Even as we operate in politics with an awareness of what is politically possible and wise – we cannot confuse our political judgments with ultimate judgements, we cannot equate a political order with the kingdom of God. This is both the challenge and the opportunity: our politics desperately needs people whose imaginations are not dominated by the political, but that kind of imagination is becoming increasingly difficult to cultivate and maintain.


Jl: You argue against calling the United States “post-Christian.” Can you summarize why you find the label unhelpful?

MW: I understand what the term is meant to refer to; clearly much has changed regarding the relationship of Christianity and American institutions and culture, but I find the term unhelpful because, “post-Christian” implies that there was a previous time in which society was so thoroughly Christian that it could be declared Christian. When was that? At what point did it change? Are we trying to get back to that point and what would that mean?

Regarding the present, it overlooks – and promotes overlooking – all of the ways in which our culture, politics, communities and lives continue to be influenced by Christian contributions and resources.

Regarding the future, it suggests a foreclosing of options, a darker future, when I have great hope for the future.

Jl: One of your key themes is the importance of keeping politics in its proper place. The obvious application for people of faith is to prioritize faith commitments over political ones. But what is the proper place for politics



“‘Post-Christian’ implies that there was a previous time in which society was so thoroughly Christian that it could be declared Christian. When was that? At what point did it change? Are we trying to get back to that point and what would that mean?”

A church that fears the power of cultural and political circumstances more than it fears the power of God?

for someone who believes that this life is all we have? If you don't believe you're part of or waiting for something bigger, why shouldn't politics – and winning – become the most important thing?

MW: I argue in the book that humility in politics can be motivated by just an honest assessment of politics itself, even without reference to God or a higher power. The history of politics is a history of misguided intentions and unintended consequences. People dedicate their lives to achieving what seemed to them to be an unimpeachably positive policy change only to find out that what they pursued didn't work out the way they had planned, or that they had been aiming for the wrong kind of change. Regardless of one's religious perspective, we should all be able to acknowledge the complicated, contingent, imperfect reality of politics, and carry a sense of humility about our deepest political convictions because of it.

Jl: You express concern about “a church that fears the power of cultural and political circumstances more than it fears the power of God.” Can you unpack this a bit and perhaps suggest how to guard against it?

MW: Part of what I'm addressing here is the kind of spirit that is sometimes associated with the “post-Christian” conversation we discussed earlier. When we bolster our Christian identity through appeals to how isolated and embattled we are, when we are constantly bemoaning the current state of things and the “forces that align against us,” it can develop an unhealthy culture with unhealthy people who lack joyful confidence in the Lord.

I don't say this to cut off honest discussion about the state of our culture and politics, I certainly think there are things to be concerned about, but the public should see Christians' hands lifted up in prayer or reaching out to serve much more than they see us wringing our hands. And it is through prayer and service, among other things, that we will actually loosen the grip of this constant sense of embattlement and insecurity.

Jl: You currently run the Center for Christianity and Public Life. What do you hope to see happen through the Center?

MW: The Center for Christianity and Public Life exists to contend for the credibility of Christian resources in public life, for the public good. Our mission is advanced through provoking a public reconsideration of the value of a Christian contribution to our politics and the resourcing of Christian civic leaders who are convinced that spiritual formation is central to civic renewal. I'm tremendously encouraged by the early returns on our work, including the success of our Public Life Fellowship programme, our first annual For the Good of the Public Summit, and the early responses to *The Spirit of Our Politics*, which provides a window into the kinds of ideas and convictions that ground our work.

John Inazu is a law professor and political theorist at Washington University in St Louis. He writes the substack newsletter, [Some Assembly Required](#), in which this dialogue appears in full.





The Opportunity Costs of Identity Politics

ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE BLACK UNDERCLASS

ERIC PARKER

Politics in the United States centres on many polarized and controversial topics that diminish healthy political debate about real existential threats to human flourishing. Spending a disproportionate amount of time on hot-button issues draws attention away from these threats and represents a real opportunity cost. For instance, the future of work is being challenged by the deployment of generative AI and massive automation. For much of our parents' and grandparents' lives, it was common to occupy positions within the same organization for the entirety of one's working life. For this generation, we will not only be changing jobs multiple times, but *careers*. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that upwards of 30% of work activities will be automated by 2030 and as much as 48% by 2035.¹ Job displacement could be historic in scope. This issue represents a real threat to our future prosperity as individuals and as nations, but it is hardly addressed in current political discourse.

The Black Underclass and Human Flourishing

I have spent the last several years thinking about the ongoing opportunity cost of identity politics and the black underclass. Over 20% of all those considered to be impoverished in 2022 in the US are black, despite the fact that only 13.5% of the total population is black.² Why are so many struggling to flourish? Debate rages on concerning

the causes behind the stagnation of the black underclass. If you are of the political left, you may be more inclined to explain this by appealing to systemic barriers – or even systemically *racist* barriers – oppressing African Americans. If you are of the political right, you may be more inclined to think that the problem lies within the *culture* of the black underclass. You might also be inclined to think that it's their responsibility to change their ways if they want to get ahead in the world.

In America today, political discourse around the role of racism in our structures has heated up to the degree that I believe it to be a distraction from factors that may be more important in enabling the black underclass to flourish.

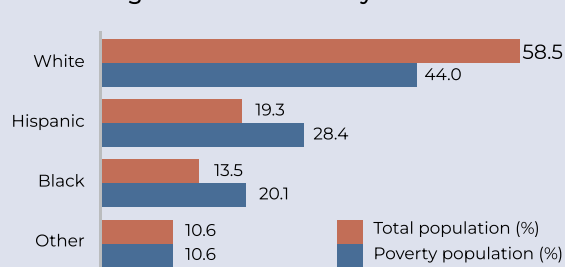
Racial Politics

I am a black American. I spent the first decade of my life growing up in the inner city of Montgomery, Alabama, with a single mother. While Alabama's racial atmosphere had improved since the 60s, in the 90s, racism was still palpable. "Race mixing" was socially forbidden, the N-word was used frequently, and dismissive attitudes from whites were not uncommon. These experiences are ingrained in my memory. Despite living in a society still harbouring overtly racist attitudes, I was able to climb the social and economic ladder beyond what my parents could have ever dreamed.

Racist attitudes have continued to improve, but black poverty rates remain disproportionately high. It is clear that a multitude of factors are to blame for the

1 Eric Hazan et al., *A New Future of Work: The Race to Deploy AI and Raise Skills in Europe and Beyond* (McKinsey Global Institute, May 2024), 15–17.
2 Emily Shrider and John Creamer, "Poverty in the United States: 2022" (U.S. Census Bureau) <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.pdf>.

Distribution of Total Population and Poverty by Race Using the Official Poverty Measure: 2022



stagnation of the black underclass, and I have spent much of my academic life trying to understand what enables flourishing even within hostile environments such as the one I grew up in.

Spending so much of our time determining which attitudes, institutional policies and social structures are or are not racist seems to me to draw our attention away from more obvious paths to flourishing for suffering racial minorities. Racism and injustice are threats to society that we should weed out wherever they are found. But most of what holds African Americans back in the bottom quintile of the income distribution are factors other than oppression or racial injustice, and these urgently need our attention too.

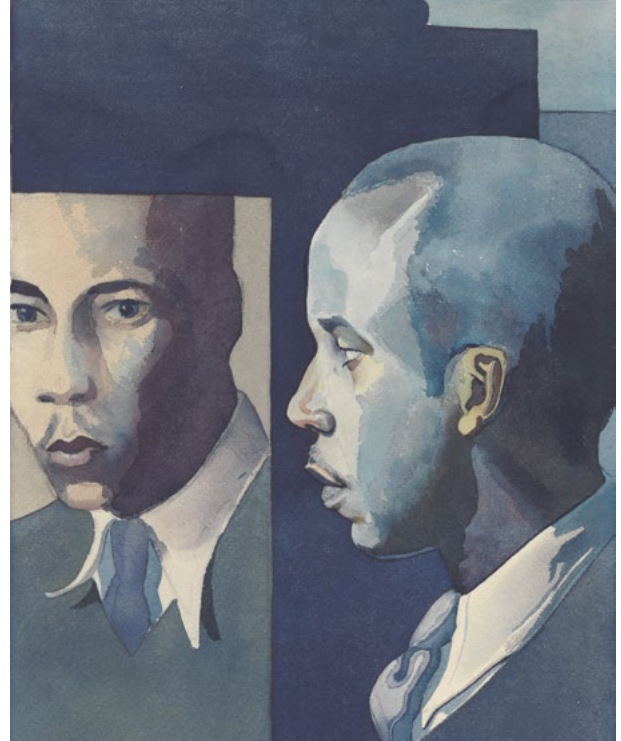
I believe it to be more likely that so many fail to flourish for two reasons – one that could be called cultural and one that could be called systemic.

Cultural Factors

Those living in cultures suffering the extremes of poverty have adopted cultural practices that help them survive in these environments. However, some of these practices hinder their assimilation into the systems and structures of the broader society. In this way, the problems faced in the black underclass are not because of systemic racism *per se*. It is largely a cultural divide that separates groups. This is essentially the conclusion of the great Harvard sociologist, William Julius Wilson, in much of his work studying inner-city blacks.

Culture is an undeniable factor in determining life outcomes. Wilson points out that some cultural traits are instrumental in perpetuating the alienation of the black underclass from the larger society.³ For example, inner-city culture defines and directs the nature and extent of trust, the concept and importance of “street smarts” to everyday survival, and what it means to “act black” or “act

³ William Julius Wilson, *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 14–15.



Samuel Joseph Brown, *Self-Portrait*

white.” In some inner-city contexts, it may be wise to avoid eye contact with those you meet. But step outside of this context into the wider society, say for a job interview, and this same act can be perceived as antisocial, leading the interviewer to classify them as an undesirable applicant.⁴

Negative perceptions such as these are formed independently of the race group of the applicant, and (in this example) improving the applicant’s chance of success would most likely require coaching them in how to present well and to understand corporate culture and expectations.

Systemic Factors

The legacy of the Jim Crow era of American history is that despite racial barriers to political and economic prosperity being formally removed in the 1960s, a whole group of African Americans were nevertheless left behind. Their progress was blocked by the class barriers that are naturally embedded in an only partially meritocratic system. This is what happens when a country segregates, fails to adequately educate and discriminates against

⁴ Wilson, *More than Just Race*, 17–18.



an entire community for generations. Merely opening legal doors to advancement does nothing when social and educational ones have been closed off for so long. In the modern era, those in the black underclass have not the social capital to connect themselves to otherwise available opportunities, nor the human capital to perform the necessary tasks in an increasingly technology-based job market.⁵

Whatever racial prejudices may still be at play in American society, the bigger injustice may be that we have failed so many inner-city kids and families in the American social contract, which strives to offer equal opportunities to all. Conservatives tend to oppose the idea that society should produce equal outcomes for all, and rightly so, but they fail to appreciate that we have not even begun to approximate a social landscape in which it can be said of the citizenry that they have equal opportunities. So many in the black underclass are floundering because we have not resourced them with the necessary tools with which to succeed within our systems and structures. Policies that would make the largest generational shift would target the family, education, social networking and the power of personal agency. Policies, systems and structures that undermine these should be dismantled.

Towards Equal Opportunity

Social structures promote or restrict advancement of individuals based upon their conformity to the implicit values and goals of the broader society that are embedded in the structures themselves. For instance, markets generally reward some combination of ingenuity, hard work, fortitude, competition, honesty and interpersonal connection. They typically discourage some combination of laziness, fragility, dishonesty and antisocial and uncooperative behaviour. Similarly, the Western elementary education system was built, in part, to help foster skills and behaviours we value as a society. Academic and personal success within this system is determined by one's ability to internalize and consistently reproduce these traits. Traits like diligence, perseverance, self-discipline, and pro-social behaviors which facilitate cooperation are all expectations within the system's structural makeup. There are incentives and sanctions within this structure designed to induce these traits.

As Christians, we should be seeking to create systems and structures within society that align with God's design for human flourishing. This is where it is important to have some sense of what constitutes biblical human flourishing so that we can examine both structure and culture in hopes of pointing the way forward in these

communities. For individuals to flourish, both structures and cultures must be brought into closer alignment with God's intended design for them. We would do well to think more deeply as God's people about how he has intended both of these spheres to function so that we can lead the way in our personal ministries, involvement in mediating institutions, and our roles in civil society. We know that when God's *shalom* is present then there is prosperity, health, reconciliation and contentment. It is when we seek to live in ways that are contrary to God's design in our social structures, our individual lives, or both that we see God's *shalom* hindered in both our lives and society.

Racism is an evil that all Christians should oppose wherever it is found. However, in a deeply polarized post-Civil-Rights political landscape, it is easy to get distracted from factors that may go further in explaining our social inequalities. This is an opportunity cost that the poor can ill afford. Let's not get distracted from building better families, creating educational opportunities, and providing better job training so that we can break the cycle of poverty in this generation.

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John Quincy Adams Ward, *The Freedman* (1863)

⁵ Wilson, *More than Just Race*, 9.

“A Miscarriage of Justice”?

CHRIS WRIGHT

The inquiry into the Great British Post Office Scandal is still ongoing amidst public outcry against the breadth and depth of the injustice perpetrated and demands for some kind of justice to be done. But what is justice?

The ITV series in January 2024, *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, brought the matter to glaring public attention, causing extensive commercial and political embarrassment. But many of us thought, “And about time too.” The flawed accusations against subpostmasters (of having falsified accounts and defrauded the Post Office of large sums of money, based on a bugs-prone IT system), started 25 years ago in 1999. The matter was exposed 15 years ago in 2009, the same year Alan Bates began his group’s campaign for justice. A forensic investigation, commissioned by the Post Office itself, concluded 10 years ago in 2013 that there were indeed serious flaws in both the software and hardware (thousands of them), but the investigation was terminated and its results denied: “The investigation,” reported the Post Office, “has confirmed that there are no system-wide problems with our computer system and associated processes.” Nothing to see here, folks. They lied.

As the cover-up went on, so did the prosecutions. And on and on. The sheer numbers are staggering. Between 1999 and 2015, some 4,000 subpostmasters were accused of financial wrongdoing, some 900 were prosecuted and 236 ended up in prison. Mere statistics cannot grasp the scale of suffering and

loss inflicted, especially when the accused and isolated individuals were being told “You’re the only one,” by agents who knew there were hundreds of others being pursued. Many were financially ruined, with bankruptcies and evictions for some. Many lost their reputation and trust in their local community; most lost their jobs; some lost their freedom; some lost their marriages; most lost mental and physical health; at least four took their own lives, and others have died before receiving compensation. Hundreds and hundreds of ordinary men and women.

“This is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our nation’s history,” said Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. He’s right, of course; and yet even the word “miscarriage” – a tragic event that brings profound grief and pain to any woman for the child she carried – seems somehow an inadequate metaphor when we think of a thousand and more people (including families) whose lives have been devastated or robbed altogether, through egregious corporate malfeasance. *Massacre of justice* sounds more fitting.

What then is “justice,” and what does the Bible say? Inevitably we must think first about God himself. We easily and rightly say that “God is love.” But if you’d asked an Old Testament Israelite (who also knew plenty about God’s love), what they most associated with Yahweh their God, they would likely have uttered two words – “salvation” (Yahweh is the only God who saves, Isa 45:21–22), and “justice” (Yahweh loves justice, Isa 61:8).



Justice as God's character

The conviction that God is characterised by justice comes early in the Bible. Abraham was sure of it, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" he asks (Gen 18:25). Yes of course he will! – so you can pray even for Sodom and Gomorrah.

Since human kings were supposed to do justice, how much more will the King of the universe reign with justice. Justice defines the government of God.

Righteousness and justice are the *foundation* of your throne.
(Ps 89:14; Ps 97:2)

Justice is what this God loves and delights in.

The LORD *loves* righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of his unfailing love. (Ps 33:5)

I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,"
declares the LORD. (Jer 9:24)

Justice as God's demand

"... on earth." Did you notice that in the last quote? God's justice rules in heaven of course, but it is *on earth* that God wants it to be done – "on earth as in heaven," as we pray about God's will. And how does that happen? Well, doing justice is what God requires from *everyone*, at one level, according to Micah's definitive statement about how we should live.

What does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8)

But, again and again the Bible insists that God, the supreme Judge, holds accountable to himself *especially* those who exercise any kind of political or judicial authority, and God demands that they should ensure that justice is being done in society. This goes right back to the instructions God gave to Moses.

Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality Follow justice and justice alone ... (Deut 16:18–20)

It was above all the duty of kings, as Psalm 72 prays for David's descendants on the throne.

Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.
May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.
(Ps 72:1–2; also Prov 31:8–9)

Paul and Peter both agree that this is the prime duty of civil authorities – even in the Roman empire (Rom 13:4–6; 1 Pet 2:13–14). And Daniel courageously made it his advice to the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:27).

Injustice, then, and especially when it inflicts pain and suffering on its victims by leaving them poor and needy, turns God's love and delight to anger and judgement. Many of the Psalms express this very powerfully. (Why do we never hear them prayed in church, if we want God to put things right "on earth"?).

Do you rulers indeed speak justly?
Do you judge people with equity?
No, in your heart you devise injustice,
and your hands mete out violence on the earth.
(Ps 58:1–2; 82)



Isaiah points out that some injustice is the result of government legislation – that is, not just by people who *break* the laws, but those who *make* them, for their own damaging self-interest.

Woe to those who make unjust laws,
to those who issue oppressive decrees,
to deprive the poor of their rights
and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people,
making widows their prey
and robbing the fatherless. (Isa 10:1–2)

There are those who hate the one
who upholds justice in court
and detest the one who tells the truth.
(Amos 5:10)

The scale of lying (or suppressing the truth) in the Post Office over many years would fall foul of the Old Testament's severely deterrent law against perjury. According to Deuteronomy 19:16–21, anyone found guilty of lying in court was to be punished by whatever punishment would have been suffered by the one they falsely accused. That would stop frivolous and malicious lies.

But this also raises the question of punishment as a dimension of justice. After all, the Post Office can fairly claim that it has paid millions in compensation and some wrongful convictions are being overturned in the courts. But would even blanket exoneration of the victims satisfy “justice”? There is still the question of accountability, of not just “getting away with it.” One compensated subpostmaster said that she couldn’t rest until at least some of those who had wronged her were behind bars, rightly imprisoned as she had wrongly been. This is not nasty vengeance. It is a deep human instinct, embedded in our laws, that wrongdoers should face some proportionate penalty for the suffering they have caused others.

But will they? Ever? Cynicism and history don’t give much hope that the complex web of guilty parties in the Post Office scandal will be untangled into successful convictions and penalties. Justice is so often cheated in this life, we say. But then, the Bible is clear: this life is *not* all there is. There is a higher throne and a supreme court. For ultimate justice is God’s prerogative *and* God’s promise.

Justice as God’s promise

Abraham’s rhetorical question (Gen 18:25) gets an answer from an unexpected source, the otherwise very cynical voice of Ecclesiastes. He observes exactly what we’ve described,

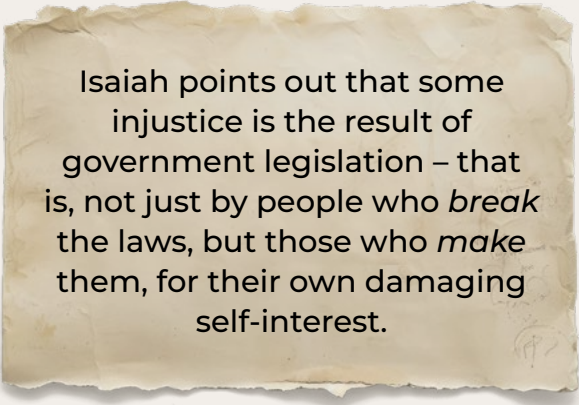
In the place of judgement – wickedness was there,
in the place of justice – wickedness was there.

But then he goes on with this bold affirmation:

I said to myself,
“God will bring into judgement
both the righteous and the wicked,
for there will be a time for every activity,
a time to judge every deed.”
(Eccl 3:16–17)

And that constitutes part of the gospel. For it is good news that evil will not have the last word in God’s universe, nor will evil-doers get away with it forever. God’s final judgement, his utterly just rectification, will put all

things right (Rev 19–20) before he makes all things new (Rev 21–22). *God will do justice.* Promise. It will be accomplished through the Messiah, Son of David (Isa 9:7; 11:4–5), who turns out also to be God’s Servant with the same mission (Isa 42:1–4), and will inaugurate the Spirit-filled reality of justice and peace (Isa 32:1, 15–17).



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injustice is the result of
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is, not just by people who *break*
the laws, but those who *make*
them, for their own damaging
self-interest.

Meanwhile, there is no contradiction between wanting justice to be done, such that those who have done terrible wrong should be justly punished, while *also* praying for them (and their victims) – like all sinners – to come to repentance and faith and eternal salvation in Christ. Such double hope was modelled by Maureen Greaves, whose organist husband Alan was murdered on his way to church in 2012. She was thankful that justice was done when his two murderers were convicted and imprisoned, but she also said, “My prayer is that they will come to understand and experience the love and kindness of the God who made them in his own image, and that God’s great mercy will inspire both of them to true repentance.” Amen to that.

Chris Wright is the Global Ambassador of the Langham Partnership (www.langham.org) and is a Senior Research Fellow of the KLC. This article was first published in Transform, the magazine of Langham Partnership UK and Ireland, in April 2024.



Is the International Rules-Based Order Now Broken?

MICHAEL SHIPSTER

Arkhyt Kuindzhi, *Red Sunset, Dnipro River* (1905–8)

What exactly is the International Rules-Based Order? If you seek a precise definition, or even try to trace its origins, you will struggle. It came to the fore in the 1990s and early 2000s, after the end of the Cold War, in debates about globalisation, international law and how the governments of the world should themselves be governed. The best short definition I have seen is from Professor John Ikenberry of Princeton University (in an interview with the Financial Times's Gideon Rachman): "It's a set of commitments by states to operate according to principles, rules and institutions that provide governance that is not simply dictated by who is most powerful."

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1990–91, which brought the Cold War to an end, also marked the end of the last great territorial empire. After some four millennia in which empires were often dominant, sovereign national states – many operating within regional associations like the European Union and Organisation of American States, alliances like NATO and informal groupings like the G7 and G20 – now reign supreme. But how are their actions to be regulated, according to whose rules and how should those rules be enforced?

In 1941, during the Second World War, the Atlantic Charter, agreed between Roosevelt and Churchill, agreed a vision for a post-war system of international relations that would secure lasting peace, promote cooperation between

nations and ensure that the cataclysm of world war should never occur again. In 1945, after the end of the war, this led to the establishment of the United Nations, whose founding document, the UN Charter, became in effect the rule book for international relations, enshrining the fundamental principles of self-determination, recognition of equality between sovereign nations and commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes without the threat or use of force.

**"A set of commitments
by states to operate
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JOHN IKENBERRY

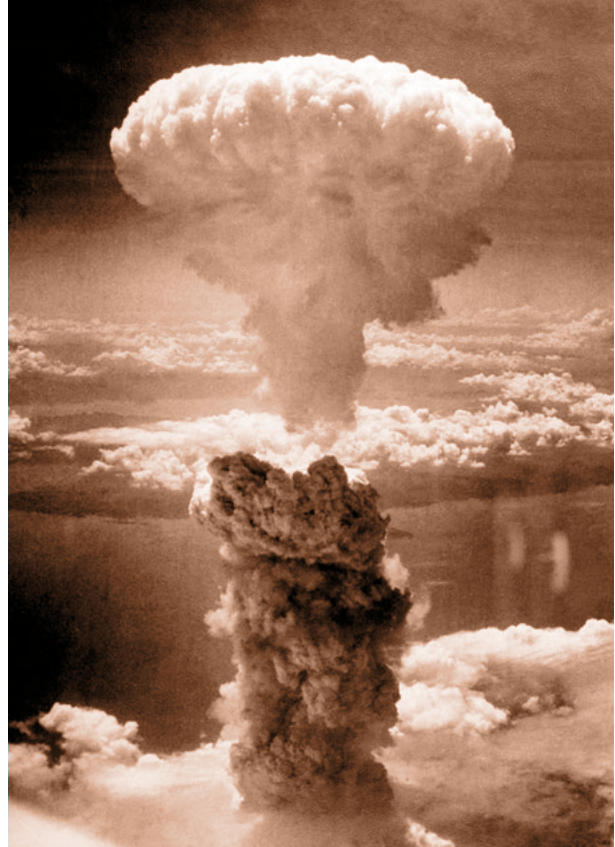
These principles were not new. Attempts to secure lasting peace and promote cooperation between nations through rules have been a staple of international relations since diplomacy began. The immediate forerunner of the UN, the League of Nations, was established in 1920 as a response to the destruction and slaughter of the First World War. Although well intentioned, it failed through

lack of committed resources and active international support. The US Congress refused to endorse it, although the US President Woodrow Wilson, an ardent "liberal internationalist," had been one of its prime movers. The UN was a more ambitious project and had a more promising genesis. Championed by the US and UK and supported by three other victorious nations – the Soviet Union, France and China (as it then was) and other allies and European countries – it was buttressed by mandates and rules to give it teeth. In due course all the nations of the world signed up, recognising that granting veto rights to the

five great powers was a necessary price to get necessary buy-in and effective leadership.

Alongside the central structures (General Assembly, Security Council, Secretariat) were agencies to provide executive capability across the full range of human activity: law (the International Court of Justice), finance (World Bank and IMF), Health (WHO), Trade (WTO) and so on. Despite failures, including destructive regional wars (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Middle East, Balkans) the UN can claim to have staved off further global conflict – that could have gone nuclear – during the Cold War. Nearly 80 years later, imperfect though it may be, it survives as the mainstay of global cooperation, peace and stability.

One of the most important early achievements of the UN was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly in 1948. Outlining basic rights and freedoms for all mankind, it remains the bedrock for laws on human rights across the world. The Geneva Conventions, extended in 1949, remain another important check on transgressions in time of war. Covering not only the treatment of prisoners of war and civilians, they also apply tests of proportionality, military necessity and humanity (prohibiting torture). During the Cold War there were international agreements limiting the development and use of types of weaponry (especially nuclear) and prohibiting the use of certain weapons altogether (chemical and biological). In addition, the superpowers, recognising their mutual danger, have signed bilateral treaties limiting their arsenals of missiles and nuclear warheads and introduced confidence-building measures to keep open lines of communication in times of crisis and to reduce the risk of accidental conflict.



Together, these measures constitute a formidable edifice of safeguards, and possibly punishment, facing any country and its military contemplating going to war. Or they should. But as we know, breaches are legion, often going unpunished. And it is not always the same bad actors responsible. Disappointingly, perpetrators are to be found on all sides. And that is part of the problem.

In the last two years, two conflicts in particular have highlighted the difficulties of preventing or restraining countries determined to go to war in defiance of the rules: Russia's war on Ukraine which escalated sharply in February 2022; and Israel's destructive campaign in Gaza in retaliation for Hamas's murderous attack on Israel on 7 October 2023.

In both cases there has been widespread condemnation of the levels of violence, disregard for civilian casualties, deliberate targeting of hospitals and other non-military facilities, mistreatment of prisoners and other human-rights violations, denial of humanitarian access and wanton environmental damage. All to not much effect. Despite immediate strong denunciation of Russia's actions by the UN General Assembly in 2022, Russia has managed to cultivate a small but solid base of support among its neighbours and the Global South, including Belarus, Iran, China, India and North Korea. Western-led sanctions against Russia have hurt, but the war continues. Similarly, although there was initial condemnation of Hamas after its shocking attack, the subsequent brutal and indiscriminate Israeli military response in Gaza has attracted worldwide opprobrium, in particular failing tests of proportionality, necessity and humanity. Criticism of Israel by its closest allies, especially the US and UK, has however been muted,



including unwillingness to pressure Israel to agree to a ceasefire. Meanwhile the Israeli Government has shown no willingness to moderate its military operations.

Such equivocation is not new. International responses to alleged breaches of the UN Charter have seldom been based solely on an objective, legalistic or ethical appraisal of the rights and wrongs of the actions taken. They are influenced by traditional alliances, strategic interests, domestic politics, economic advantage and antagonism towards the allies of the country in the dock – for example, in the case of Russia's actions in Ukraine, suspicion in the Global South of US and NATO motives and good faith, and reluctance to be lectured by Washington.

During the Cold War the Soviet Union regularly used force to bring members of the Warsaw Pact bloc to heel when their pro-Soviet communist governments faced popular opposition and insurrection, claiming that they were invited in to help: East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Poland (indirectly, 1980–81). In 1989 the Soviet Union similarly portrayed its military intervention in Afghanistan as a response to a request for assistance by a friendly, legitimate government deposed in a coup. Other countries, notably the US, NATO members and Pakistan, rejected this justification, accusing the USSR of a flagrant violation of sovereignty motivated by a drive for strategic advantage.

It is not far-fetched to draw a direct line from these episodes to Putin's mindset in 2014 and then in 2022, when he believed, firstly, he could justify invading Ukraine; and secondly, he would not have to pay a high price for doing so.

On the other side of the coin, in 1953 the intelligence services of the US and UK orchestrated a coup to depose the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and to restore the monarchy in response to plans to nationalise foreign oil interests in the country and also to counter Soviet and communist influence in the region. Iranian antagonism towards the US and Britain even today can be traced directly back to these events. In 1970, after the leftist leader Salvador Allende came to power in Chile, the US again used covert action to undermine his régime, paving the way for General Pinochet to seize power in a military coup in 1973.

During the Cold War, competition between the Soviet Bloc and the West tended to split the world into two camps on international issues such as these. Since 1991 and the end of the ostensible struggle between capitalism and socialism, the picture has become more complex. Rapid economic growth and globalisation have created new motivations and opportunities for national and regional advantage, beyond ideological allegiances. It is in these more fluid circumstances, no longer carved up into solid blocs, that concern to define and defend the International Rules-Based Order has assumed greater importance. Given its origins, it is unsurprising that the US and other Western countries have led criticism of the actions of rogue states like North Korea, Iran and Syria, and competitors like Russia and China. By themselves, appeals from the West for better behaviour are undermined, however, by a suspicion that, when it suits them, the US and its allies will do whatever they want, claiming exceptions and selective justifications, able to ignore any ensuing outcry, without paying any great penalty. The US-led invasion of Iraq probably did more to weaken the West's moral authority



Devastation in Bucha, Ukraine





than any other episode since 1945. The US-led military intervention in Libya in 2011, ostensibly on humanitarian grounds, but resulting in the overthrow of President Gaddafi, served to convince Putin that the West's aim had been régime change all along and he should not trust them again.

It is not far-fetched to draw a direct line from these episodes to Putin's mindset in 2014 and then in 2022, when he believed, firstly, he could justify invading Ukraine; and secondly, he would not have to pay a high price for doing so. Countries in the Global South which have refused to take sides against Russia, have taken this position partly out of suspicion of US motives and hostility to US hegemonism, and also (especially in Islamic states) antipathy to Western moral values and irreligiosity. They see Western countries, banging a drum about the International Rules-Based Order, as no better than the rest, just as prone to hypocrisy, putting their own interests first and seeking to obfuscate the issues with grand talk of fundamental principles and rules. Moreover, by not taking sides, they may be rewarded with Russia's cheap oil and gas and opportunities to sell weaponry to Russia. Donald Trump's strident espousal of "America First" after he was elected President in 2016 was, for many countries, merely a blunt confirmation of what they assumed had always been the case.

So where does that leave us? The International Rules-Based Order may be flawed, its origins traced to a particularly Western concept of international liberalism. It may be compromised by suspect motives and undermined by breaches on all sides. But the principles embedded in it remain important, even universal. There must be rules. Governments, just like individuals in all societies, need and accept them because they promote a better, safer world. The alternative is international anarchy, a savage free-for-all, threatening the possible destruction

of the planet itself, as we often see in terrifying dystopian movies; and at the very least, distracting us from tackling the really urgent global challenges of environmental degradation and global warming.

Breaches of rules that countries have signed up to or should respect should not be cause for despair. They happen. But nor should they be tolerated, ignored and go unpunished. We live in an imperfect world. God's justice may only be completely found in the next world. We may not expect it in this one, but we should still try. Nor are all transgressions equally reprehensible. We should be able to distinguish between, for example, Russian motives in attacking Ukraine – to conquer territory, change the borders of a sovereign country and remain in charge afterwards – and US motives, however misguided, in invading Iraq: to disarm a rogue state threatening US and regional security, effect régime change and then leave. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the US could claim that civilian casualties caused by military action were regrettable collateral damage. In Ukraine and Gaza, by contrast, civilian casualties often seem to be intentional, designed to terrify and cower the whole population, a deliberate tactic of war.

To quote Professor Ikenberry again, the International Rules-Based Order is work in progress, aspirational rather than an accomplished goal. While it may be in the US and NATO members' strategic interest to defend Ukraine from Russian aggression and ensure Russia is not victorious, it is not merely self-serving for them to claim that what is also at stake in this conflict is the defence of an international system based on rules and order that is in the interests of the whole world.

So, my conclusion is: let us value and protect what we have, commit ourselves to peaceful cooperation and use the formidable instruments that already exist – incentives and deterrents – many of which have stood the test of time, to deal with the international crises and conflicts we will undoubtedly continue to face. Besides, in current circumstances there is no prospect of being able to develop a new, better system from scratch, not least because those same flaws and conflicts that exist now in international structures would stand in the way of developing a meaningful consensus about what should replace it. Possibly, only a terrible global catastrophe, on a scale similar to the two cataclysmic wars of the last century, would make a root-and-branch restructuring possible. And that would certainly be too high a price to pay.

Michael Shipster, CMG, OBE, is a former British diplomat whose overseas postings included the Soviet Union, India, South Africa and the US.

KOHIMA

REMEMBERED

MICHAEL SHIPSTER

Dzukou Valley near Kohima, Nagaland, India

World War commemorations this year will mark the 80th anniversaries of some of the major battles of 1944, which turned the tide, foremost among them D-Day and the battle of Normandy. You might wonder what is special about an 80th anniversary. It is probably the last time that a living veteran who fought in the battle can participate. That old soldier (or airman, or sailor) will now be over 100 years old. After his death there will be no one left to bear living witness to an event that changed history.

Some anniversaries inevitably get more attention than others. Take Kohima, for example. Where? you might ask. It's in Nagaland, on India's border with Burma. In April 1944 this little hill station was the last line of defence that stood between the seemingly invincible Imperial Japanese army and the plains of India to the west. Here a small garrison of Indian and British infantry fought an entire Japanese Division to a standstill on a patch of land hardly bigger than a football field. Afterwards Earl Mountbatten described it as "one of the greatest battles of history ... in effect the Battle of Burma, naked unparalleled heroism, the British Indian Thermopylae." But today, the battle is little known, or remembered.

Before the war, Kohima had been an idyllic colonial backwater, with spectacular views over the Naga Hills, surrounded by lawns and flowers, and also a tennis court. As the Japanese advanced, the defenders, taken by surprise, tore up the gardens and dug themselves in to await the coming onslaught. For thirteen days and nights they held out, beating off wave after wave of attack, under constant artillery and mortar bombardment and sniper fire from the surrounding hills. Often just yards apart, Japanese, Indian and British soldiers engaged in savage hand-to-hand fighting with whatever weapons were to hand, even trenching tools.

My father, John Shipster, reached Kohima as part of the relieving force in May 1944. Just 22, he was commanding an infantry company in the Punjab Regiment, part of Slim's 14th Army; a seasoned veteran of heavy fighting in Burma, in which half his battalion had been casualties. He himself had been severely wounded, and afterwards was awarded the DSO.



Garrison Hill, Kohima, 1944 (Wikipedia)

Recovered from his wounds, he was now back in action. The scene that greeted him was one of utter devastation. The trees were gaunt skeletons, the ground

torn up by shellfire and littered with unburied dead bodies. The stench was appalling. The once-pristine gardens now resembled an apocalyptic scene from the Somme. Though the garrison was relieved, the Japanese were far from beaten and it took a further two months of bloody fighting to drive them out of Nagaland and into Burma.

After the war, the battlefield became a cemetery. The lawns and flowers were restored and the tennis court again marked out, this time in stone. Two posthumous recipients of Victoria Crosses are buried there. At the base of the ridge is a massive rock, heaved into place by Naga tribesmen, which bears the inscription: "When you go home/Tell them of us and say/For your tomorrow/We gave our today."

When I was growing up, Dad seldom spoke about the war. Then in 1988, when I was posted as a diplomat to India, we planned to visit the battlefield together. We travelled slowly by train across the Indian plains he had known as a young soldier, first to his regimental depot near Ranchi, where he received an emotional welcome. But when the time came to proceed to Kohima, he said no: he preferred to let his memories rest undisturbed. He lived to a good age, but during his last years his sleep was racked by nightmares, which he could never clearly recall on waking.

In 1990, as part of a small group of Burma veterans, he visited Japan to meet Japanese soldiers who had fought at Kohima. This was viewed at the time by some British veterans, especially ex-POWs, as almost an act of betrayal. Dad understood their bitterness but felt it was the right thing to do. Meeting his elderly Japanese hosts and sharing memories, he found peace and reconciliation. During the visit he presented his personal notebook and map of Kohima to a former Japanese company commander who had fought there.

Towards the end of his life, already suffering from Parkinson's disease, he began to write a memoir of his wartime experiences. Although a practised raconteur, he found writing difficult. But gradually the story took shape, and by the middle of 1999 he had a workable draft. Along the way I offered advice, encouraging him to say more about himself as a young officer far from home, commanding Indian soldiers in the thick of savage fighting. But he remained reluctant to lay bare his innermost feelings, thinking it uninteresting and also too self-centred.

I did not altogether give up. Before the manuscript went to the publishers, I asked Fergal Keane, the BBC

correspondent, whom I had got to know in South Africa in the early 1990s, whether he would read the manuscript and interview Dad. He agreed.



Dad found these sessions difficult, but the recordings were a revelation, a contest of wills: Fergal sympathetic but persistent, deceptively skilful, probing for insights that would enrich the story; and Dad, stubbornly resisting and parrying with bluff humour, occasionally opening up to a degree he never had with me or our family.

The result was some vivid new material for the book. But by this time Dad's health was failing, and he was impatient to see his story in print. In his foreword, Fergal wrote a generous appreciation: "The hours I have spent in his company I will treasure: he has shown me the value of courage and consistency. This book is a testament to the valour of many men; it also reminds us of a sacrifice that succeeding generations must never forget." Dad saw his book, *Mist on the Ricefields*, published in 2000 but died a few months later.

Although these interviews did not reshape Dad's book, they aroused Fergal's interest in Kohima. He began to dig deeper, seeking out other veterans, including Japanese, to hear their own personal stories before old age overtook them. Combined with his busy portfolio as BBC foreign correspondent, it took years of diligent research and interviews, including visits to Japan, to complete the story. All that remained was to visit Kohima itself.



Koh-Indian and Gurkha soldiers inspect captured Japanese ordnance during the Imphal-Kohima battle, 1944 (Wikipedia)



View of Kohima Ridge after the battle (Wikipedia)

In 2009 we travelled there together – my first visit too – and spent several days walking the battlefield, speaking to local Indian and Naga veterans and visiting the memorials. At the end of our stay we chanced upon a group of elderly Japanese tourists: sons and daughters of soldiers who had not returned home from the war. They were led by a young Shinto priest, whose grandfather had been killed near Kohima. I showed him a picture of my father, and he in turn pulled out of his pocket a sepia photo of a young man in an oversized uniform, staring seriously into the camera, flanked by his parents. He said he would be performing a ceremony for the families at the cemetery and invited us to join them.

The following morning we looked on as they gathered in silence on the tennis court, set up a makeshift altar and performed a service of remembrance. One by one, they bowed, knelt and put a pinch of incense on the flame. An elderly woman, carrying photos of her uncle and father whom she had never known, read a message to them, her voice shaking with emotion. After some concluding prayers, the priest thanked us for being there. Our presence, he said, had helped them find comfort and peace. In reply I explained why we had come and how profoundly Kohima had affected my father. Also how, when British veterans had travelled to Japan to meet their former enemy, they had met with anger and incomprehension from some other veterans, who had suffered terribly at the hands of the Japanese whom they could not forgive. But visiting Japan and meeting his former Japanese foes had helped my father find a deeper understanding and peace.

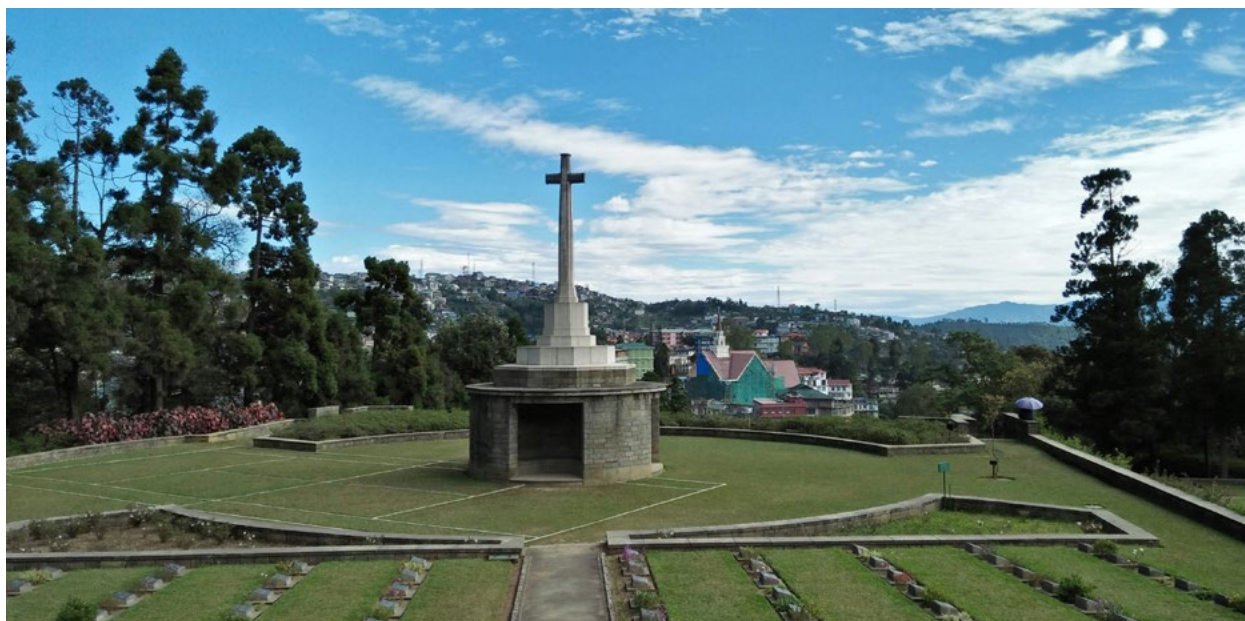
The following year, Fergal's book, *Road of Bones, the Siege of Kohima*, was published to critical acclaim, especially for its attention to Japanese perspectives. It was dedicated: "In memory of John Shipster, soldier."

In January this year I revisited Kohima, this time with my son, Robert. I wanted us to walk together on ground trodden by his grandfather eighty years before. As with Dad, we travelled by train across India. In Kohima, I noticed that much had changed. Fifteen years' rampant property development had covered the hills and ridges, traffic choked the narrow roads and previously open vistas were now blocked by hotels and apartments. Only the cemetery, with its neat lawns and flowerbeds, was unchanged, a precious haven in a bustling resort. Locals and tourists came to enjoy its peace and tranquillity, especially at sunset. But not all understood its significance. One Indian couple told us they thought it was a battle between British forces and Indian nationalists.

History and remembrance are kept alive by the living. As each generation moves on, memories and stories become compressed, distorted and sometimes lost. Already, quite different narratives compete for primacy: a heroic victory for the British Empire and civilisation, versus an anti-colonial skirmish that hastened Indian independence. In twenty years' time, if the battle of Kohima is still commemorated, it will be as distant to the living as Balaclava was to me when I was growing up, and its legacy will be even more muddled.

But our visit keeps alive, at least for another generation, our own family memory of a brave young man who eighty years ago served faithfully and well; whose life and character were profoundly affected by his experiences; and who overcame the scars of war to seek reconciliation and understanding with his former enemy.

Michael Shipster, CMG, OBE, is a former British diplomat whose overseas postings included the Soviet Union, India, South Africa and the US.



Kohima Memorial (Vipin Joseph)

Food in their Hands

How Policymakers Shape the Food Supply

EDGAR V. COLL AND DIANA SALGADO



The relationship between politics and food has historically been complex and multi-faceted. Governments have played a crucial role in determining how food is produced, distributed and consumed, from agricultural production regulations to food security policies. Here we briefly show how politicians and their ideologies have shaped the food system.

Food insecurity is on the rise. Hopma and Woods¹ suggest that the concept of food security has evolved from a national to a global focus, where international organizations like the FAO address this issue with an emphasis on technological and market solutions to tackle food scarcity. However, this approach often ignores the social and political dimensions of hunger, reducing it to merely a technical problem. Investments in biotechnology can increase food production and improve food security. However, political and ethical tensions are evident in concerns about resistance to, for example, genetically modified organisms.

Failure to establish adequate policies directly affects food security. In the United Kingdom, government policies have been blamed for leaving British farmers too vulnerable to competition from lower-quality imports, a problem Brexit promised to solve. Interestingly, on the other side of the world, Mexico has struggled with similar policies that favour imports over local farmers' produce. So, why then is it a surprise when people vote for candidates that express nationalism? Although international commerce improves economies, certain limits need to be established to avoid ruining local farmers, particularly farmers whose techniques involve a worldview based on respecting the land, water sources and biodiversity, that have local and millenary know-how, biocultural diversity, etc.

Sin affects institutions, not only persons. Ideologies such as the neoliberal discourse, for example, have played a key role in shaping the contemporary food system.

This economic approach, promoting privatization, supposedly free markets, deregulation and reduced public spending, has had profound implications for food policy. Guthman² notes that neoliberalism has driven the expansion of agribusiness corporations, promoting the production and consumption of processed foods. These policies often prioritize corporate interests over public welfare, leading to overproduction. This increases obesity, food inequality, food waste, and many other social and ecological problems.

In conclusion, to meet future challenges, it is essential to recognize and address the political dimension of food, promoting policies that not only increase food production but also ensure equitable and sustainable access.

Diana Salgado works on research projects to decrease food waste and improve food safety in circular economy projects in the UK. Edgar V. Coll is a food engineering student from Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de Mexico. He was Diana's student in her Sustainable Development and Food course.

2 J. Guthman, "Neoliberalism and the Making of Food Politics in California," *Geoforum* 39 (3) (2006): 1171–1183.

1 J. Hopma and M. Woods, "Political Geographies of Food Security and Food Sovereignty," *Geography Compass* 8 (11) (2014): 773–784.



Boardman Robinson, *Europe* (1916)

Craft: David Parish interviews James Allcock

DAVID PARISH

The Michaelmas 2023 edition of *TBP* had an article by Jason Fischer called “Handmade Resistance.” One of the *TBP* readers, James Allcock, responded with an email to Craig Bartholomew saying how it had resonated with his experience of working with wood to make model buildings. As I have known James for some years, Craig suggested I interview him.

David Parish: James, here we are in your home surrounded by wooden scale models of various buildings from your house to cathedrals. What got you into model making?

James Allcock: It was during the Covid lockdown. My son called me and said one of our grandsons would love a wooden fort for Christmas and could I make one. I decided to try but all I had was some plywood and an old tenon saw. I imagined a mediaeval castle and looked at some images online. There was also an online video on how to make a drawbridge and portcullis that would work.

I wouldn't say the end result was elegant, but my grandson loved it and it still is a treasured possession, now populated with a Lego army.

DP: What happened next?

JA: I had so enjoyed the experience I decided to build a model of our home.

DP: Did you buy any model-making tools for this next project?

JA: No. I just continued with my saw and chisel and plans of the house and again the act of building something with my hands was pleasing. I then thought of trying something larger. One of my parents'

homes had been in Newcastle and we often visited nearby Durham Cathedral, which has a magnificent setting on top of a hill above the river. There is a wonderful view from the mainline East Coast railways that looks across to the cathedral.



DP: At this point you must have thought of buying special tools and getting scale plans of the building?

JA: No, I was happy with my saw and I looked at images online and went with trial and error, and I admit some sections were so bad I smashed them up and started again.

DP: What was the most difficult aspect of building something so large?

JA: Well, getting the scale and proportions right without plans and drawings was hard. However, model building was proving satisfying and getting under my skin and I found various ways of coping without a fretsaw or bandsaw. For example, the side walls are cut through at window height and the windows cut out and the building glued together.

I also came across a copy of the book by Dorothy L Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, and the idea that humankind made in the image of God is of someone who makes things. “God



made, regarded and rested.” This echoed my own experience and made sense for me of God as creator.

DP: We are looking at a model of Salisbury Cathedral, a much more complex building with the iconic central spire. Why Salisbury as the next project?

JA: One Advent we visited friends who lived in Salisbury and went to the Advent Carol service. It starts in total darkness and as the choir sings the opening anthems the cathedral gradually fills with light. It is a wonderful building and I asked a friend to take photos of it from several angles and I worked from those. I had also bought a fretsaw to help with the details. Again, it's not perfectly to scale but I found the construction experience very satisfying.

DP: It looks amazing! And now the latest is Lincoln, famous for its three square towers rising above the fenland.

JA: Yes, another wonderful building with a rose west window. I liked the form and mass of the building.

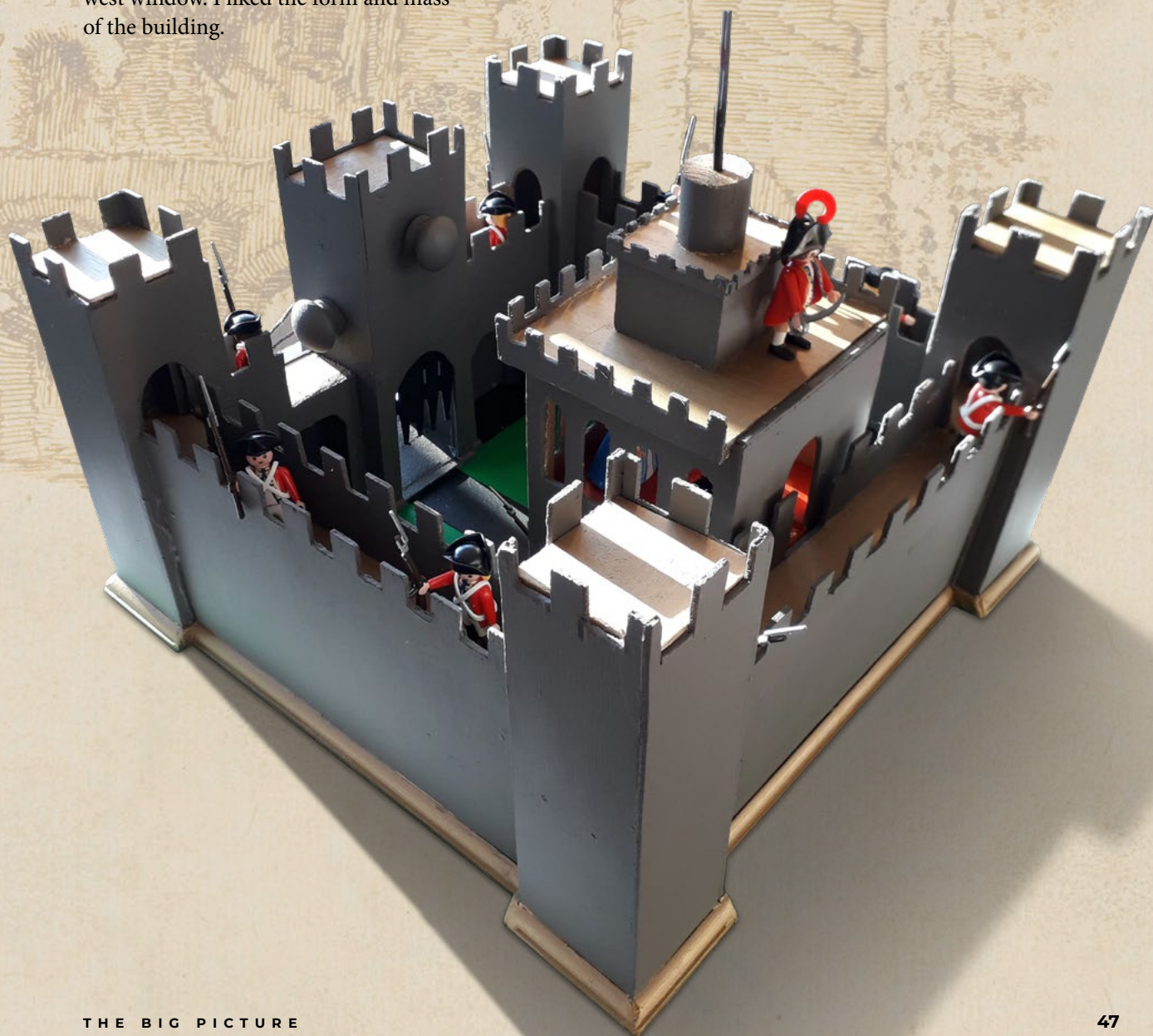
DP: Do you have any engineering background?

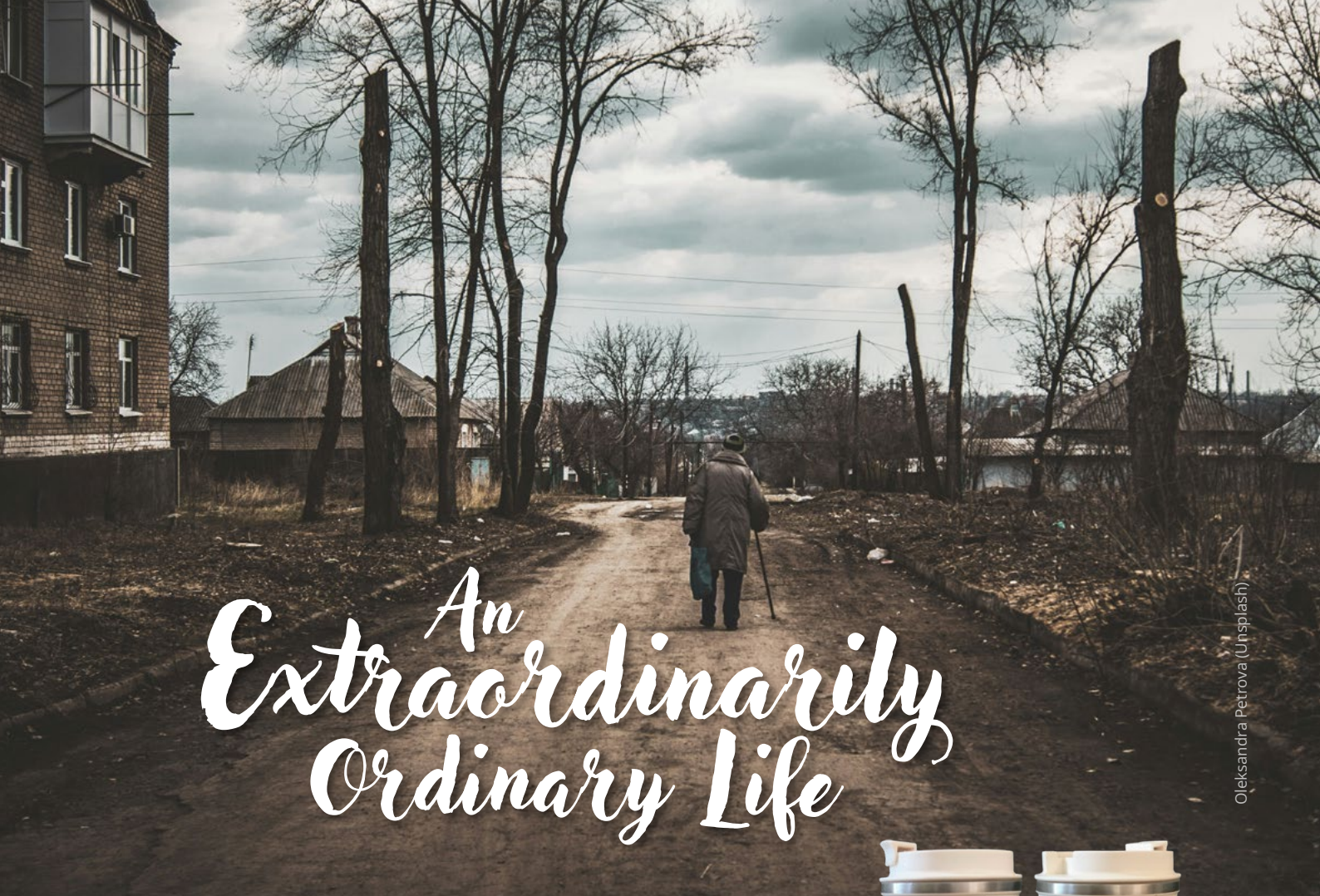
JA: No, I worked in the oil industry and was responsible for writing major gas contracts and seeing a large project come to fruition was satisfying but I was not making anything. My model making has filled that need. I can't stand as well as I used to and so I am thinking of moving to wood carving which I could do sitting down but having started using my hands I don't want to give it up.

DP: It has been a fascinating journey and thank you for sharing it.

James Allock was a senior executive with British Gas and was given an OBE for services to industry. He was also a board member of LICC and has written and spoken about Christian distinctives in business.

David Parish is a retired airline executive and an Associate Fellow of KLC.





An Extraordinarily Ordinary Life

Oleksandra Petrova (Unsplash)

EILEEN JOHNSTON

For six years now, as a chaplain, I've wandered halls, met and visited so many old souls, now well into their 90s. You might think it's a dull calling, but the truth is, if you're curious about characters getting through life, then people are wonderfully interesting. Like snowflakes. No two alike. The memories that are glued in their minds after all these years are revealing.

I am forever grateful that my father showed interest in people, and was an example to me of considering others first. He recommended asking people questions, for they love to be respected in this way and share their life experiences. So, each day I visit a different level of care home where the residents who have their roots in Russia, Germany, Romania, the Czech Republic, Japan, Norway and Denmark, have all learned English, while many of the staff responsible for their care communicate between themselves in their foreign language. The residents hesitate to ask them to speak English for fear of retaliation. They are well aware that they no longer have the luxury of living by their own schedule. You brush your teeth when the support worker helps you.

I enter the world of senior care as a stranger, with my

book bag, filled with music and a notebook, a Bible in one hand and a mug in the other, with my name engraved on one side, and "The steadfast love of the Lord

never ceases, His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness oh Lord" from Lamentations 3 on the other side. Politely introducing myself, I get offered a seat, even if it's the corner of the bed, and a relationship begins. (A folding fishing stool works wonderfully in the hallway, so I'm not looming over people, but can chat with them face to face).

The wing that made my heart beat just a little harder was the lock-down floor: the Alzheimer area. How would I begin there? Entering the code and hearing the big doors click and unbolt, I walked in smiling, but wondering what this morning would hold. "Oh God, give me a sign of how to begin." To my left, behind a glass wall was a large dining room filled with residents, and if I could have put my hand through that glass wall, I would've touched a piano. With my small collection of cherished gospel songs, I walked in, sat down to play some dinner music, my back to the people and my heart calming down. After the meal a few



daughters and sons came to tell me they hadn't heard their mother string a sentence together in a few years, but that she had just sung a few lines of "In the Garden" as I played. Thank you, God! And that was the beginning of an Alzheimer's choir.

This is such an unpretentious choir. Some stand very tall, and enunciate as best they can. Some whistle, some sing the same line through the entire song, some try to harmonize, some hold hands, some sway back and forth like synchronized swimmers, and we're joyful, praising God in our unconventional ways together. It doesn't matter that we don't remember each other's names. There's pure joy in being together when they hear me announce, "Yeah! The choir's all here!" They sing, they listen, they clap, they move to the rhythm and it is well with our souls. Music speaks where words fail.

In the three facilities, people would describe themselves as feeling vulnerable, unsure, useless, and sometimes worthless, a burden to their family who are relieved their loved one is in a facility. I pause. A loved one? Someone who might get a visit once a month, or once a year? So what is my purpose as chaplain? To be a loyal friend, a ray of light in someone's last chapter of life or perhaps just for a 20 minutes visit, which they might not remember when I walk out the door, which does not matter at all.

Communication

When visiting, I am hyper focused on my communication style. It starts with a cheerful hello! So glad I found you, or I was looking for you! A little hand hug on the arm or shoulder, or a real hug without latex gloves on, and a comfortable sit down, indicating I'm not in a rush or on a time limit. I want to be present, interested, engaging and affirming so they can trust our connection by seeing it on my face, my smile, my eyes, my touch, and by sharing comfortable, relaxed time together. Because of some significant change in their lives they've had to move into a seniors' facility, away from everything familiar. They feel disoriented, unconfident, inconvenienced. They are asking themselves, "How do I fit in now, and where do I fit in?" For some it's as though the school bus dropped them off and they're waiting for the ride that never comes to pick them up again. I sometimes hear them say, "Oh, my brother is coming any minute now. I need to sit by the door."

For some it's as though the school bus dropped them off and they're waiting for the ride that never comes to pick them up again. I sometimes hear them say, "Oh, my brother is coming any minute now. I need to sit by the door."

Loneliness sets in in this foreign building, this small room now called their home, and loneliness is a terrible thing which can have awful consequences. Doctors in Britain recognized its effects and decided to begin using social prescribers versus antipsychotic or depression medications. They arranged befrienders with similar interests who would accompany the anxious and depressed person to social engagements and appointments. British prime minister, Theresa May took this seriously, and created a position of Minister of Loneliness to which Tracey Crouch was appointed in January 2018.

So I ask a few questions of the people who are in life review, reflecting on where they came from, why they are at the place they're at now and where they are going, and most love to talk and tell their story. There is healing power in sharing stories. Catharsis, sharing, laughing, mourning and remembering together, can be good for the soul.

Which people walk these memory lanes of transitions, challenges and suffering with them can make a significant difference. Walking with someone they can trust, someone caring, kind and patient, can ease their souls and even stop the pain from becoming overwhelming. It's been vital to consider how to lead these conversations: not feed the grudges and sorrows, but to have them consider who showed up to help in hard times, and if people are believers, how God showed up and sustained them, nourished their souls with his promises in Psalms 12; 23 and 139:16.





story has been amazing as well. Imagine their joy when some of those stories were published for the residents of the Lodge to read.

This chaplaincy is so unique. Having a wonderfully supportive board, and being the first chaplain in these care homes has allowed me to be as creative as my energy allows. I never need to write a sermon or perform a funeral service. I am just required to befriend those who are faltering and friendless, and be a signpost to Christ. The walk on the road to Emmaus can happen in many places. Perhaps taking a walk with someone in a wheelchair so they can have the pleasure of hearing the birds and seeing the flowers coming up, sitting with the smokers on their patio, taking someone for a drive past their farm that they developed from bare land. Just because people slow down as

they age, their gifts and the things they were passionate about don't vaporize. Being curious about other's interests and abilities shows empathy, and can bring respect and comfort, which helps them not feel alone.

After each visit, I ask if I can pray for them and their loved ones. Remarkably, in these six years, no one has declined my offer of prayer, whether a believer or not. Those who I consider masters of ageing are the ones who exercise their grateful hearts, even though there are many disappointments that they could focus on. Those who practise being still and mindful of the blessings of the day are the winners of the ageing race. They focus

on the promises of God, that he knew them before they came into being and had a plan for all the days numbered for them.

If only my feeble attempt of sharing about the humanness of aged seniors and chaplain visits could inspire you to commit to a level of loyal friendship with a senior in your neighbourhood. The thread that binds us all together is that we don't want to walk the last chapter alone. Committing to a friendship with a shut-in senior might grow on you!

Be interested, curious, challenge yourself, try something new and know you're making a difference in someone's day. You might be surprised by joy as you do.

Eileen lives on a small farm in rural western Canada where she enjoys gardening, honey hives, horses in the pasture and knitting in the winter.

Togetherness

As the years went by, I felt the weight of being one half-time chaplain for three facilities. I believe that we've all been created to create, so maybe all I needed to do was discover people's interests and passions, and create a small group with similar interests, a little community within the home where friendships could be forged. There's a heartwarming, comforting effect on people when they gather together in small groups. My first group was created when I sat knitting in the coffee room with a few ladies who loved the colourful children's socks I was working on. Coffee and stories are a great combination, and soon I was learning about raising sheep, spinning wool, knitting for their families and for the boys in the war. Within two weeks I thrifted 20 pairs of needles, bags of leftover yarn, cast on 30 stitches for everyone and the first Knit and Natter group was founded.

Our blanket of squares of many colours and various sizes was stitched together by a 95-year old knitter from another home during Covid, when the local hospital couldn't accept her 300 preemie hats. Since then connections have been made at other weekly group gatherings, singing sacred songs around an organ, remembering God's grace and faithfulness in their lives. Creating a songbook with a huge font, helps those with failing eyesight. I brought in seeds, soil, pots and gardened with individuals, and presently we have a book club with 20 attendees that I read to weekly – a delightful hour of sharing a book with tea and cookies. Coaxing a few of the great storytellers to attempt writing the odd short

Just because people slow down as they age, their gifts and the things they were passionate about don't vaporize. Being curious about other's interests and abilities shows empathy, and can bring respect and comfort, which helps them not feel alone.

EMBRACING Vulnerability

MARCUS GROHMANN

How we co-exist in pluralist, multicultural societies is one of our defining socio-political challenges. Increasingly we find that our *differences* are experienced as *divisions*, and societies, communities and even churches polarise as a result. The way forward is arguably not so much about finding what holds us together, but may rather be about learning how to constructively *live with difference*.

Encountering difference can be unsettling. Being faced with an “alternative truth” can make us defensive if we experience it as a threat to our identity. But appreciating

their structure that was to reach the heavens and destroyed their unity by dividing them into a multitude of languages. Thus human diversity is a curse, a punishment, and will be overcome in the kingdom of God when we become “neither Jew nor Gentile” in Christ.

Since the message of the story seems self-evident, Western readers may doubt that they read this story through a lens. But interpretations that have a different cultural starting point may see the story unfolding in a different way. Néstor Míguez offers an alternative reading

“ One thing that can help to transform this defensiveness into an openness towards the other is seeing difference as an opportunity for a conversation. ”

one another’s differences does not mean having to endorse convictions that we find incompatible with our own. First and foremost, it is an expression of neighbourly love, of affirming the existence and presence of another person, another group, another social identity. One thing that can help to transform this defensiveness into an openness towards the other is seeing difference as an opportunity for a conversation. This is what jurist Frauke Rostalski calls *discourse vulnerability*. If we learn to empathise with another’s situation, a conviction that might have seemed utterly untenable to us may become understandable. This, in turn, can be an important building block of relationships in increasingly fractured and polarised societies.

Being rooted in modernist, Western, evangelical traditions, as I am, I have found myself challenged as my research has brought me into contact with different perspectives, even in how communities read the Bible. Here are some examples.

The Tower of Babel: Is diversity a curse or a blessing?

The Tower of Babel story seems so clear that its interpretation is taken for granted: humanity united by a common language became advanced enough and arrogant enough to try to rival God. God (ironically) *descended* on

that reflects his interactions with the indigenous Qom people in Argentina.¹

He points out that Genesis 10 speaks of the birth of nations *with their languages and territories*. Babel is founded by Nimrod (10:8-12), a “mighty warrior” and

¹ Néstor O. Míguez, “Comparative Bible Study, Genesis 10–11: An Approach from Argentina,” *Ministerial Formation* 100 (2003): 57–65.



Pieter Bruegel, *The Tower of Babel* (c.1563)



from that the master, who entrusted different amounts of money to his servants, is to be identified with God?

Re-reading the story from the context of the peasant society Jesus was living in can help us consider some aspects that are often overlooked:

- **Usury or extortion:** The first two servants generate 100% (!) profit at a time when the average interest was 12%. Would Jesus' hearers understand these servants to be practising good business or economic exploitation?
- **The confession of the master:** He freely admitted that the third servant's assessment of his unjust and oppressive character was quite correct.
- **The cruelty of the master:** The "worthless" servant is cast out into the darkness, while the one modelling his master's abusive tactics is rewarded.
- **The context:** This parable is separated in our Bibles from verses 31-46 by a new heading, but what if they're meant to be read together? Here the Son of Man separates the sheep from the goats based on who *cared for* the needy, the marginalised, the suffering, the imprisoned – those who perhaps were cast out into the darkness by the powerful.

empire builder. In Genesis 11, the whole land having one language (11:1)² and the migration of a people into a new territory with fortifications and a tower suggests to Míguez *the exercise of imperial power* – empire building that required enslavement, control and oppression. Míguez sees no mention of defying God, but rather of imposing their power upon the rest of humanity.³ Common language is a creation of the empire and it suppresses the divinely ordained diversity evident in chapter 10. So God descends not to punish with division but to restore: "in the biblical tradition, when God descends from heaven it is a liberative act."⁴ God halts imperial ambitions and ensures other people's freedoms to live and speak as they desire.

The Qom people in Argentina still suffer the effects of their colonial subjugation. Such a re-reading of God's authoritative word serves to vindicate their identity, language and culture, and it offers an alternative to some of the interpretations of the Bible that were used to demonise their pre-Christian identities.⁵



Luise Schottroff suggests that the introductory words, "The kingdom of God is like," would sometimes better be translated as, "Compare the kingdom of God to," inviting comparison or even contrast, not direct equivalence.⁶ In this way, the parable takes seriously the exploitative structures of an economy that favoured the rich at the expense of the poor. The kingdom of God, by contrast, turns upside-down the world that is characterised by "Whoever has will be given more". It is *generosity* towards those who had their little taken away that determines the true king's allocation of reward.

The Parable of the Talents: The principles of God's kingdom or their opposite?

Similarly, the dominant interpretation of the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30) in the West encourages mindfulness of the gifts that God has given to us, even implying that there would be dire consequences for those not being faithful with them. But where does the idea come

The point in reconsidering these texts is not to dismiss one interpretation and to elevate another. The point is to understand that *everyone's* interpretation of the world and Scripture is shaped by the histories of our families and nations, by our traditions, by our languages and economic circumstances. Even our reading of the Bible should provoke conversation and empathy, not divisiveness.

² This is a legitimate translation of the Hebrew, which may not intend all of humanity.

³ Míguez, "Comparative Bible Study," 62.

⁴ Míguez, "Comparative Bible Study," 63.

⁵ Míguez, "Comparative Bible Study," 57.

⁶ Luise Schottroff, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), 295. See also 136f.

Theology and its languages

As the Bible is translated, the gospel is contextualised to other conceptual worlds. As it moves into new places and languages, sheds its foreignness and becomes indigenous, doctrine may take different shapes.

In my research, I studied a reformed denomination in South Africa that retains strong connections to Western, English-speaking traditions. Based on 1 Timothy 2:12, women are prohibited from preaching in church services but not from playing other active and important roles, including the giving of testimonies. This argument is more difficult to make in *isiXhosa* – a language spoken by many members of the denomination. In *isiXhosa*, there is one word for preaching, prophesying, or giving one's testimony. The prophetess Anna in Luke 2:36 could legitimately be called a preacher! Since *isiXhosa*-medium churches don't distinguish between preaching and other forms of proclamation, some may end up stricter, preventing women even from sharing testimonies in church, or more permissive, allowing women to preach and give testimony.⁷

Context matters, including the way we make sense of the world through our languages.

Two ways to live? How self-centred is our mission theology?

The missiological anthropologist Darrel Whiteman tells of a time he wondered openly how his Japanese colleague, a theology professor, coped with the tension of being Japanese and a Christian.⁸ The response he got was, "What tension?" "I love the Buddha. ... There's no question, Buddhism has had a profound influence on my life. But I love Jesus so much more." Many people in the West might struggle to reconcile a "love for Buddha" with a genuine Christian witness. Whiteman points out how people, depending on their cultural-linguistic backgrounds, are used to different ways of thinking of possibilities. Whereas the Western, Greek-inspired tradition tends to think in either/or categories, many Asian cultures and languages tend to make distinctions in degree rather than in kind.

This prompts the question: In intercultural theology or cross-cultural mission, do we expect (or oblige) people to accept our way of thinking when they accept the Lord Jesus or are we able to adjust to

their worldview and find ways of communicating the gospel that meets people where they are?

How to harness vulnerability for fruitful relationship-building

Responding to differences with patience and curiosity rather than premature judgement is demanding. It requires entertaining the possibility that my own perspective is not universal, objective or absolute. While I may have good reasons for my own convictions, others may have such, too. Reminding ourselves that *all people* were created in God's image can help us to grow in grace. It can also strengthen our trust in the working of God's Spirit in other people, so that we become free to relate to them where they are, on their terms.

Living in this way entails a healthy measure of vulnerability, and the potential that others would make themselves vulnerable to us as well. That they would show us grace and patience where we may come across as narrow-minded, domineering or ignorant. In such encounters of mutual frailty, we may find not just that our vision of self and others is expanded, but our vision of God too.

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7 Marcus Grohmann, "From Celebration to Utilisation: How Linguistic Diversity Can Reduce Epistemic Inequalities," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45, 1 (2024): a2981, 5.

8 Darrell L. Whiteman, *Crossing Cultures with the Gospel: Anthropological Wisdom for Effective Christian Witness*, Kindle edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 43.

Painting Ruth

SHELLEY CAMPBELL

This is a show of two sets of representations: Ruth's and a portrait of loss. Without knowing how I would achieve this outcome, I began the process by handling the raw material of Ruth: the text of the narrative.

For three years, I explored Ruth's character as an immigrant; she left her homeland, Moab, to reside in Bethlehem in a remarkable instance of devotion toward her mother-in-law, Naomi. I compared Ruth's to my own status as an immigrant. We are both figures of transience and, accordingly, my practical work corresponded to themes of movement, "The Other," and in a contemporary context, the tragic circumstances of immigrants and refugees arriving in the UK and entering a political treadmill organised by lamentably inadequate national leadership.

A portrait is the representation of a sitter. While the book of Ruth has a narrative structure of plotline advancement, the one constant and prevailing condition of the story is Ruth's character. The text provides numerous instances for commentators to interpret Ruth as an unusually loyal, kind, modest and praiseworthy person. Thus in art history, Ruth is conveyed as a

hard-working but diffident gleaner. See, for example, *Harvesters Resting (Ruth and Boaz)* by Jean-François Millet, 1850-1853. For a portrayal of Ruth's enduring commitment to Naomi, see *Ruth and Naomi* by Philip Hermogenes Calderon, 1886. There is an exciting ambiguity in Calderon's portrayal which is discussed by J. Cheryl Exum.¹

For my portrait of Ruth and without removing her heroism, I took an approach that removed the details of her story and the inheritance of daunting art historical precedent. From the text, I decided to detach as much content and meaning as I could and in order to do this, I simply highlighted words or sentence fragments that appealed to me, taking into account the prevalence of certain repetitions.

While decontextualising the content of the narrative by highlighting and extracting textual fragments, I felt in control of the new kind of raw material I was handling: the words of the text. Although this medium was neither paint nor clay, I was shaping it into

¹ J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 129-174.

Shelley Campbell describes the process by which she arrives at two "word pictures," which in-turn are distilled into font fragments to create visual art works. The process represents an inquiry into the biblical figure of Ruth and, through it and alongside it, a grappling with profound personal grief. A version of this article first appeared as the final section of Campbell's doctoral research project.

a formal representation. In this way, I felt liberated from making through conventional materials; I had an impression that I had broken a kind of “fourth wall” in the plastic arts.

At this point, I assimilated Walter Benjamin’s historical materialism to justify my process. For Benjamin, history is not portrayed in the dominant voice of the interlocutors, but is instead found in the overlooked, threadbare, and cast-off remnants of the past. In pursuit of an explanatory articulation and greater understanding of his current situation, Benjamin fossicked through his childhood (see for example, *A Berlin Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*) as a German Jew during the rise of Fascism in 1930s Europe.

In my interpretation of Benjamin’s argument, threadbare scraps of text might carry an alternative reading. For him, a decontextualised fragment has the potential of possessing an insight that the overarching narrative has missed or dismissed. Invigorated by the manipulation of the atypical textual material, I decided to exert more pressure on the process. I envisioned making a one-word portrait through a process of highlighting words and sentence fragments from Ruth. I started with those I had already selected, and from that set, I developed a process of reducing the text to fewer and fewer words until I found a single decontextualised word that provided an alternative illumination that was missing in the commentaries.

Still, I could not predict the outcome of the exercise; I was unable to know if the process would be fruitful. I followed a step-by-step process of elimination, narrowing Ruth to a single term: guardian-redeemer (NIV). Although the process led me here, was it the final outcome or an interval?

From “guardian redeemer,” I pressed forward by scrambling and reducing the number of letters and found: renegade.

I explored the suitability of the term as a representation of Ruth. While the book of Ruth is usually scaffolded by words such as “kindness,” “devotion,” and “bucolic,” “renegade” is destabilising, and even, shocking. Analysts do not use the term “renegade” as a description of Ruth. The dictionary defines “renegade” as, “a person who has changed their feelings of support and duty from one political, religious, national, etc. group to a new one” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). After decontextualising the narrative from its origins, I returned to the text and meaning was restored.

While Ruth’s avowal of loyalty to Naomi is one of the most heartfelt expressions of devotion in literature (Ruth 1:16-17), it is equally an unspoken counterpart of denial. In the same breath as exclaiming unmistakable fidelity, Ruth forsakes attachment to her own family, culture, religion and nation. With respect to the first definition of “renegade,” Ruth’s decision to leave Moab characterises her as a renegade.

A second expression of “renegade” implies a kind of outside-the-law and deceptive behaviour. In line with this idea, some reviewers, for example Phyllis Tribble, regard Ruth’s decision to accompany Naomi as an act of defiance.² After a number of farewells and Naomi’s push for her daughters-in-law (Ruth and Orpah) to stay in Moab, Ruth disobediently follows her mother-in-law (1:8-15). And since the reader is conceivably still basking in the piety of Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi and her commitment to Israelite custom, law and God, it might go

unnoticed that at times during the narrative Ruth stretches the truth.

Several reviewers examine a gap between Ruth’s words and actions. In the following examples Ruth twists meaning. For instance, Boaz advises Ruth to stay close to the women and to keep her distance from the men. But at the end of the day’s gleaning, she reports to Naomi that Boaz has told her to work behind the harvesting men (2:21). Why does she say this? Is she testing Naomi’s affection?

Again, on the threshing-floor (3), Ruth exceeds Naomi’s instructions and in a courageous (foolhardy) and remarkable (imprudent) moment, proposes marriage to Boaz by calling him a “guardian-redeemer.” During the encounter, Ruth casts a sense of duty onto Boaz; she is conveying to him that she is aware of the implications of being a guardian-redeemer. Accordingly, since she cannot know how he will respond, her speech is a risky “ultimatum.” Then, in the morning when Boaz measures out the barley into her shawl, why does Ruth tell Naomi it is a gift for her mother-in-law? When Boaz counts out the portion of grain, he is bestowing the gift to Ruth; his mind is not on Naomi. Although commentators identify instances of, say, deception, by and large they define those slippages as catalysts for changing the widows’ circumstances.

In the second definition of “renegade,” there is a sense of both recklessness and deception. Although this reading invokes, say, a charge, in Ruth’s case, I am instead defining the term with meanings such as ardent and heartfelt. By being impassioned by an affection for Naomi, Ruth galvanises enough power to bring about revision in Levitical and Deuteronomic Law with regard to family and property. Therefore, I feel justified to settle on the term

2 Phyllis Tribble, “A Human Comedy,” *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 166-199, 171-173.

“The structured dailiness of action – hours – is a provision for living with loss. What is particularly profound about the meaning of the term is its ordinariness. While there are numbers of available distractions, and words of advice from sages and charlatans, the thing at hand – hours – is a notable presence that is always available, each of us possesses, but is utterly disregarded. As a counterpart to loss, the saturnine beat of hours is a powerful comfort.”

“renegade” as a fitting term for Ruth’s courage and needs-must attitude.

With this word-portrait in tow, I reinstated content and context in order to endorse the term “renegade” as a revelatory portrayal of Ruth.

By scrambling the text of Ruth and simplifying it to a single word, I am asserting that this process can be a tool for creating meaning. As a so-called word-portrait, the final term is an acceptable mid-point outcome and for me, indicated an efficacy of the method thus created. Applying this strategy, then, I turned my attention to providing a text for my current state of bereavement.

For allusions in Ruth, the Hebrew Bible provides a readymade narrative for the raw material of *mise en abyme* (the reflecting surfaces of a mirror/text within a text), but for a portrait of loss, I was without a “medium” from which to formalise an artwork. In order to create a comparable account, then, I had a few photographs and a clutch of short stories I was told by my mother. These “vignettes” are hardly stories. Nor are they tales that hold a sacred status, exploring Deuteronomic or Levitical law. Instead, they are snapshots from an ordinary life: the day the dogs escaped, the day the dog buried a bone in a horse’s manger, the day the boy fell carrying a log. But as reflecting surfaces, allusions, they are the very excerpts that anticipate the current circumstances I find myself in.

To address my present context, I interpreted Benjamin’s idea of scrutinising the past by poking around the forgotten, the mundane, the threadbare and the undervalued. To provide this material, I used fragments of my mother’s stories about when she was a cowgirl in Canada. I wrote and then reworked the vignettes, and as with Ruth, I

highlighted words out of context.

Following the process I had created, I pared down the anecdotes to a single word. I ended up with the term “humorous,” although in bereavement, humour seemed a long-ago idea. But having invested in the process, I gave up some letters and scrambled what was left and discovered “hours.”

When I found the word “hours” – as with “renegade” in Ruth – I challenged its suitability by exploring its meaning and in this case, its literary fixtures. For “hours,” I had two immediate points of reference: Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* – originally called *The Hours* – and the canonical hours. Through the fixture of time, each example addresses the measurement of a day. In the Liturgy of the Hours, a set of ritualised practices mark the outset of each interval which consist of prayers, readings and hymns. The day is broken up thus: Matins or Vigil (2am), Laud (5am), Prime (6am), Terce (9am), Sext (midday), None (3pm), Vespers (6pm) and Compline (7pm). Similarly, Mrs. Dalloway’s day is divided into the tasks she performs before hosting a party, buying the flowers, etc. In the streets of London, the beat of her preparations is bracketed by the intervals of the striking clock as she organises and carries out her dutiful arrangements.

The two sets of ideas unite within the work, and it emerges under the concept “necessity.” At least from one perspective, then, the property of “necessity” exempts freewill since loss and sadness are unrequested conditions. In the analogy of “hours,” then, time irrevocably leans forward; there is nothing any one agent can do to alter its inevitability. As a liturgy of prayers, “hours” symbolised the simple daily structure onto which I was clinging. For me, “daily prayers” consisted of set features: tea at 5am, dog walk at 7. At 10am, there’s coffee,

and at midday, toast; at 3, lunch and 6, dinner; at 7, telly, and at 10pm, it's bedtime. Day in, day out. Boring, humdrum, and inconsequential for some, but for me, salvation.

Returning to my context and the purposes of carrying out a portrayal of loss, I was looking to find a way back from the inertia to which a survivor of bereavement by suicide becomes subject. As explained, I wrote episodes of memories from my mother's life. Through Ruth, I produced a system for seeking fruitful associations by highlighting words and sentences. By carrying out the same method, I found "hours" as a portrait of loss.

For me, the term has relevant literary and religious correspondences that convey ideas about living a day through increments of time. As the purpose of the work was to uncover insights from the past to explain my present, the term "hours" was a satisfying and felicitous discovery.

I regarded the necessity of time by associating certain intervals of the day with particular duties: there are chores, there are meals, there are moments for rest, there might even be prayer or time for contemplation. Thus pain can be deeply experienced but, at the same time, incremental and not overwhelming; the kind of mundane beat that constructs the elements

of a day provides comfort to the bereaved. The structured dailiness of action – hours – is a provision for living with loss. What is particularly profound about the meaning of the

term is its ordinariness. While there are numbers of available distractions, and words of advice from sages and charlatans, the thing at hand – hours – is a notable presence that is always

available, each of us possesses, but is utterly disregarded. As a counterpart to loss, the saturnine beat of hours is a powerful comfort.

Still, the work seemed unfinished. Even by squaring the suitability of the

text to sentence fragments, I decided to enlarge "renegade" and "hours" to font fragments. Accordingly, I turned to aesthetic considerations in order to provide "the frame": the ontological device makers use to formalise objects into exhibition-ready works.

Again, I had in mind to remove meaning from the terms and instead use the letters as graphic images. To fulfil the requirement of removing meaning, I enlarged and cropped the words. I simply wanted to display planes of colour. For colour, I chose to imitate those that I had already been using: the black of text, the yellow of the

highlighting pen, and the white of the page.

Each chunk of font fragment became a pattern. To the shapes, I shuffled what would normally be black text, yellow highlight and white page. With one design, I altered the juxtaposition of the planes of colour and made two images not immediately recognisable as parts of fonts. Each single work, then, is a diptych.

As a final reckoning, I wanted to remove what was too personal or too private and model my feelings, ideas and process into display-ready objects. In this way, viewers are welcomed into and not rejected from the final portraits.

Shelley Campbell has submitted her PhD project and is finishing her corrections. Her work is multi-disciplinary encompassing art, religion, and philosophy (aesthetics).



FROM THE MILL
REFLECTING ON

first things first

OUR FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE

OTTO BAM

On the morning of the 11th of June, 60-plus delegates, members of KLC's international community, made their way to Cambridge and all the way to the very end of French's Road. Arriving at our office at Chesterton Mill, they were greeted with a cup of coffee and a bag heavy with books. From here, it was a short walk to St Luke's Church, the venue of our first annual conference.

The church, built in the 19th century during the Gothic revival in architecture, admits worshipers through heavy, wooden doors hung on iron hinges from thick stone walls. The church's dark, labyrinthine corridors lead eventually to a spacious sanctuary. Here, one's gaze can soar, but will inevitably be drawn towards the altar where high eastern windows create a flood of the most pleasing, soft light, which, in combination with the turquoise ceiling and its golden ribs, creates a heavenly atmosphere. It is a place where silence seems to be the native language.

The theme of this, our first conference, was "First Things First": spirituality and public theology. Craig Bartholomew, in his opening lecture, set the agenda. He started with a question. "How do you feel?" – such a simple question, but one that brought us all together into an awareness of our emotional state there in that sanctuary and in that



moment. A look inward. Then came another question, "How do you read the signs of the times?" A look outward. Geopolitically and culturally, we find ourselves in a time of great turmoil. Every day we witness violence and destruction on a grand scale – there are reports of atrocities and allegations of war crimes – in the case of Israel's war in Gaza, even genocide, in which our own (Western) governments are accused of being complicit.

Public theology is about articulating how the gospel relates to all areas of life – cultural, intellectual, political, spiritual; to wrestle seriously with all the complexities of the world. The picture can be dark. And when it is, theology does not come as a sort of intellectual anaesthetic to make us feel better – or feel less. In fact, Craig says, public theology can make it worse. When we come to Christ we are awakened to the value of human life, to the importance of justice, to a vision of a world where peace will reign, and so our anguish at evil and suffering in the world becomes more poignant. Public theology requires us to confront ambiguity and complexity with hope and courage. We need resilience and perseverance for the task – and for that, we need to be deeply rooted in a spirituality that can sustain us.

A key Bible text behind this theme is the account of

Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha. "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary" (Luke 10:41–42). The foundation for public theology, as for any Christian initiative or ministry, must be "the one thing necessary," the good portion, which Mary chooses. Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (10:42). As a small team, even though the conference was to explore the way of Mary, we often felt like Marthas, running around to welcome our guests as best we could. In the space of an hour, I found myself serving coffee, meeting delegates, running across the road to buy milk from the grocery store, unloading boxes of fruit, locking and unlocking meeting rooms, and hoping to make it back in time to present or lead a song at a plenary session!

I imagine that many of us think of slightly different things when we use the word spirituality. In Western culture, the term is often vaguely understood as a set of privatised practices of our own invention. This sort of privatised spirituality is characterised by a fixation on the self and it is easily taken by new fashions and fads. It is therapeutic in nature. But Christian spirituality has a much broader sense than this consumer-driven spirituality. At its core, Christian spirituality is a de-centring of the ego, as Craig emphasised in the inaugural Jon Hyde Lecture on the second day of the conference. But this is not a de-centring to create a void, as some forms of Eastern mysticism would have it, but a de-centring of the ego in order for Christ to occupy the centre. It cannot be privatised. Christ is both King and Priest, Lord in every sphere.

It would be a contradiction if a conference about spirituality were merely a matter of talking, which is why the First Things First was characterised by communal spiritual practices. Plenary sessions were opened with a short liturgy, reflection on Scripture, singing, and lengthy moments of silence. The programme was designed to provide ample time between sessions to linger and reflect. We endeavoured to bring spiritual practice and intellectual exploration together. My experience was that they were in perfect harmony.

Besides the plenary sessions that addressed public theology and spirituality, delegates could choose to attend any of seven electives: spirituality, politics, the arts, PhD research,

mathematics and physics, and missions; a diversity of subjects that reflects the KLC's vision for Christian research "across the disciplines."

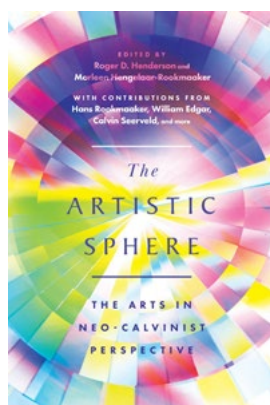
As KLC's art manager, I oversaw the arts track of the conference: three elective sessions and a plenary session dedicated to the arts. Rachel Yonan, a visiting scholar at Jesus College, Cambridge, delivered a wonderfully wide-ranging lecture, exploring the way the dimensions of physics and meaning mysteriously coexist within music. She made musical performances of Bach on the viola part

of her lecture, which, there in the light of the church's apse, were sublime. On the second day, we were joined by the playwright and author, Murray Watts. His talk, delivered in one of the church's side chapels where we could huddle around him in a circle, was full of wisdom and practical advice for artists of faith. His reflections on the spiritual practices that could bring about Christian formation in the world of the arts were profound. Bishop Graham Kings led the group in a reflection on a painting of Esther by the Bulgarian artist Silvia Dimitrova. This was a

wonderful demonstration of the way the visual arts can lead us into deeper reflections on Scripture. Our plenary session presented an opportunity to mark the launch of *The Artistic Sphere*, co-edited by Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker and Roger Henderson.

In the months following the conference, there is a particular phrase that has lingered in my mind, a phrase by Sister Wendy Beckett, quoted by Craig in his Jon Hyde lecture: "Seek obscurity." Trying and often feeling unable to choose the way of Mary while fulfilling the tasks of Martha, this phrase has helped me to present myself as a vessel and to let go of the result of my work. To go back to the one thing necessary. It has helped me to silence the ever-present voice of the ego that always vies to be the centre of attention.

Otto Bam is the Arts Manager for the KLC, the ArtWay.eu editor and an Associate Fellow of the KLC.



Justice for All

The (R)SPCA Turns 200

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

This year the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) turns 200. There is a long and chequered history of how to think about and treat animals. In the process, again and again animals have been subjected to terrible cruelty. Nineteenth century UK was no different. Not only was cruelty to animals pervasive and public, it was also celebrated in various forms of entertainment among both the poor and the rich.

The SPCA was formed on June 16, 1824, at a meeting at Old Slaughter's Coffee House in Covent Garden, London, called by Rev Arthur Broom (1779–1837). The twenty-one men who responded to Broom's call discussed the impact of the 1822 Ill Treatment of Cattle Act, the first piece of animal rights' legislation ever promulgated by a democracy, drafted by Colonel Richard Martin. Martin was part of the meeting, as were several clergy, Evangelical activists, notably William Wilberforce, a doctor, a newspaper editor, a barrister and a Jewish businessman and inventor. "Their first priorities, they determined, should be to ensure that Martin's Act was enforced, to educate the public about animal welfare, to investigate the condition of animals in the markets, streets, and slaughterhouses, and to pass stronger laws that would extend greater protection to more kinds of beasts. To do this, they agreed to found an organisation: they would call themselves the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals."¹

¹ Kathryn Shevelow, *For the Love of Animals: The Rise of the Animal Protection Movement* (NY: Henry Holt and Co, 2008), 11.

In retrospect it is hard to realise just how much resistance the SPCA encountered and just what hard work was involved in keeping it going. Broom, for example, was liable for the SPCA and when it went bankrupt he was imprisoned. A notable turning point came when Princess Victoria became a member and its existence was assured when it became the RSPCA during her reign.



What motivated most of these activists? They were by no means all Christians, but the majority were, and many were keen Evangelicals. Indeed, many of them were the same people who worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery. In 1831 Broom published an edited and annotated version² of Rev Humphrey Primatt's *A Dissertation on the Duty of Mercy and Sin of Cruelty to Brute Animals*,³ which gives one an insight into the motivations of these activists. Primatt, for example, extends Jesus' golden rule of Matthew 7:12 to horses, asking,

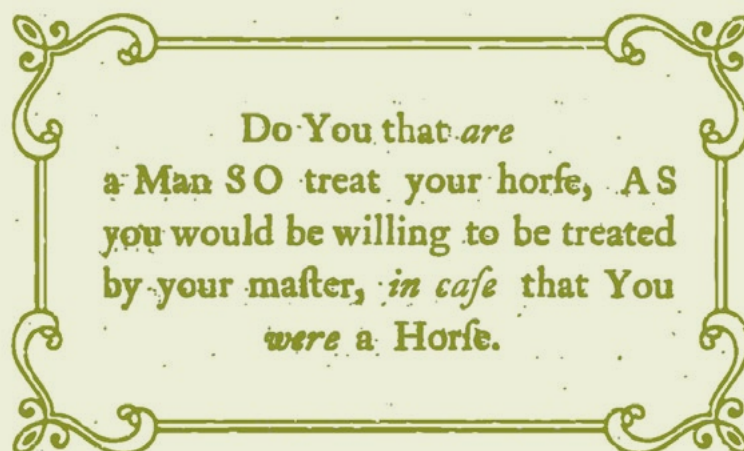
"Do You that *are* a Man SO treat your horse AS you would be willing to be treated by your master, *in case* that You *were* a Horse?"⁴

² Available at <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=XLxYAAAACAAJ&pg=GBS.PP8&hl=en>.

³ Published in 1776. Available online at <https://archive.org/details/adissertationon00primgoog/page/n12/mode/2up?view=theater>.

⁴ Humphrey Primatt, *A Dissertation on the Duty of Mercy and Sin of Cruelty to Brute Animals* (London: R. Hett, 1776), 21.





It would be hard to overestimate the number of animals saved from cruelty as a result of the work of these activists. It would also be hard to overestimate the joy that countless animals have brought into our lives as a result of their work. We need to excavate and tell their stories – there are archives to be explored and established, research to be done, and stories to be told.

Many of us love animals but never stop to reflect on how the good news of Jesus relates to our fellow creatures. This was not a mistake these activists made, and we do well to explore and retrieve their view of mission, which included relentless campaigning against slavery and advocating for the just treatment of animals. How is it that they had such a comprehensive view of mission while we so often have a thoroughly reductionistic one? Animals are not humans, despite the current tendency to describe them as our sons and daughters, but they are sentient creatures, and our role as God's image bearers is to facilitate the flourishing of all of the creation, including the animals. Romans 8:22 speaks of the whole of the creation groaning, and far too often we have made sure that animals cry out in agony to their creator. The gospel is, however, good news for all of the creation, including animals, and this is something that these activists saw and practised. For so many animals the establishment of the SPCA was akin to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, truly a hallelujah moment!

One would think that churches across the UK and in so many other countries would be celebrating the 200th anniversary of the SPCA and its Christian origins, but if they are I am not seeing it. An internet search yields few results. And yet this is a major way in which Christian witness has penetrated deep into many of our cultures and

has been welcomed by Christian and non-Christian alike. Theologically it is called "common" grace – God's activity in history restraining evil and promoting flourishing, in this case through the courageous initiative of a small group of people willing to stand up against pervasive cruelty. The anniversary of the SPCA is a marvellous opportunity to bear witness to the Christ who goes to the cross in order to lead the whole creation in an exodus from sin and death, including the abuse of animals.

The anniversary is also an opportunity to reflect on how we treat animals today. In many of our cultures public abuse is mercifully no longer allowed, but the battle against cruelty to animals has not yet been won: "Behind the walls of our factory farms, slaughterhouses, corporate laboratories, urban warehouses, and many private homes, animals still suffer."⁵

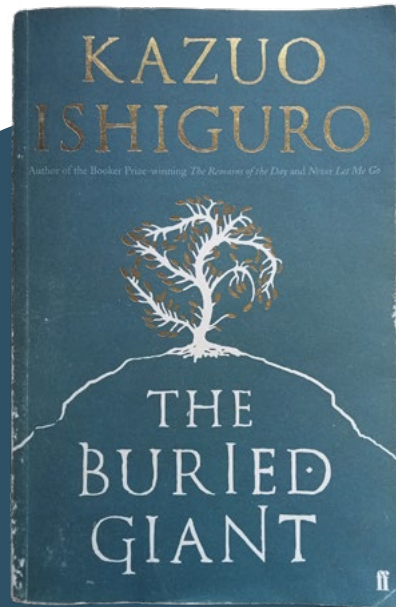
Craig Bartholomew is the Director of KLC.

⁵ Shevelov, *For the Love of Animals*, 282–83.



THE BURIED GIANT

JORDAN PICKERING



Just as we breathe continuously but rarely think about air, we go about our daily activities without thinking much about memory. Memory is the basic stuff of our humanity. Memory builds the solid structures of an infant's expanding mind. Forgetfulness shrinks our horizons as age readies us for the grave.

long-overdue visit that they must make. They remember a son. An invitation to his village. They believe – by faith or foolhardiness – they'll know where to go.

The titular buried giant appears fleetingly in chapter 2, mentioned among other supernatural threats that might beset their journey. The



Many valuable works have explored aspects of memory. Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) considers meaning and purpose via a protagonist who sustained brain damage while attempting to stop his wife's murder. Unable to make new memories and with his wife's last breath the final scar on

road climbs over a mound in which the giant is buried and a wise traveller knows to leave the path and go around.

It might seem strange that this giant plays no further role in the story, but ultimately it represents the core conflict of the book. There is a giant, dangerous even in death, subdued for now just below the surface. For those who know how to skirt around it, its potential for evil – alluded to but not named – can be contained. But this England is similarly a land whose peace is founded on evils buried, on pain blunted by forgetfulness. Is clouded peace to be preferred to clear-eyed conflict? Is it better to know yourself and not to like what you see?

his consciousness, he is forced to pursue his revenge by continually reconstructing his mission from texts tattooed on his person and a pocket full of polaroids. The masterstroke of *Memento* is that its plot runs in reverse. We see its climax at the start and we work our way forward to its beginning. That is, we experience every scene with no “memory” of its past.

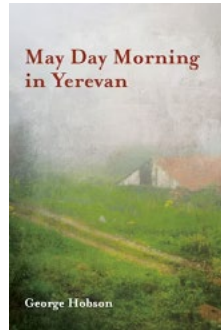
Kazuo Ishiguro's must-read *The Buried Giant* (2015) explores a related aspect of memory. It asks: is it a greater curse to be unable to remember or to be unable to forget?

The book centres on an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, living in an ancient England that has collectively lost its memory. A fog hangs over the land, erasing clarity both of vision and mind. It comes to pass that the “sense of some unnamed loss” gnaws at Axl and upon reflection, the couple becomes aware of a

In my own country, a quarter-century after the fall of Apartheid, some white South Africans still parrot the propaganda that taught them to bury any facts that would rob them of their peace. Some still find themselves able to talk about a country that has been “ruined” by black leadership, unable to form the memory of a brutalised country that was formerly only hospitable to their privileged minority. By God's grace, we were given a leader who saw a route to peace and walked us down it. Yet the buried giant of racism remains dulled but not defeated, an ever-present offence for black South Africans to bear, wounded again by those willfully blinded in a fog of forgetfulness.

Dr Jordan Pickering is Director of Media at the KLC, an Associate Editor of TBP and an Associate Fellow of the KLC.

The range of my work is very wide and includes lyrics of all sorts (nature poems extolling God's creation, love poems, poems confronting the passage of time and aging, for example), as well as narrative poems (I like to tell stories) and lengthy epic-like compositions such as the harrowing evocation of the Armenian genocide in *May Day Morning in Yerevan* (I also have three poems that evoke



the Rwandan genocide of 1994). I believe poetry must confront the darkness of the world as well as its beauty, but I do this within the redemptive framework of Christian faith. I am deeply engaged with the phenomenon of memory and of our movement, as human beings, through time and in/into eternity. Timelessness within time – eternity in time – is at the heart of my poetic vision.

Fire over the World

GEORGE HOBSON

Fire over the world,
Our darkness breeding hell;
Under our smug well-
Being, hell-fire unfurled.

Our warrior race wields
Steel; we clash, we hate;
“Peace! Peace!” yields
Few gains; we rage: our fate.

Our fate it's not. Our choice
Brings down hell. “You”, we cry,
“Are evil!” So we kill. We die.
Ah, but we could rejoice!

Rejoice in women's beauty,
Not defile it; in man's strength,
Not destroy it; of love, make duty's
Pleasure; to great length

Go gladly for the other. But no,
We're killers for whatever cause
Possesses us, whose laws
We fashion to define the foe.

We seek out foes to nail.
Darkness deepens round us, lit
By awful flames: the wail
Of women, men's howls. The pit

Of hell yawns, devours. We die.
Over the world, under it, fire.
In Beauty, a voice: “Why
Do you hate me? My desire

Is for you. I died to give
You life. I shared your night,
It's mine too. So let me live
Inside you—I'll be your light.”

Words echoing in our cave,
Words bouncing off our walls.
Whom will Beauty's cry save?
Who will hear His calls?

Rev Dr George Hobson is a distinguished theologian and poet. In the current phase of his life, officially retired from professional duties as an Anglican priest, he is living with his wife Victoria in the department of the Lot in southern France. For more on George's work see www.georgehobson.com.

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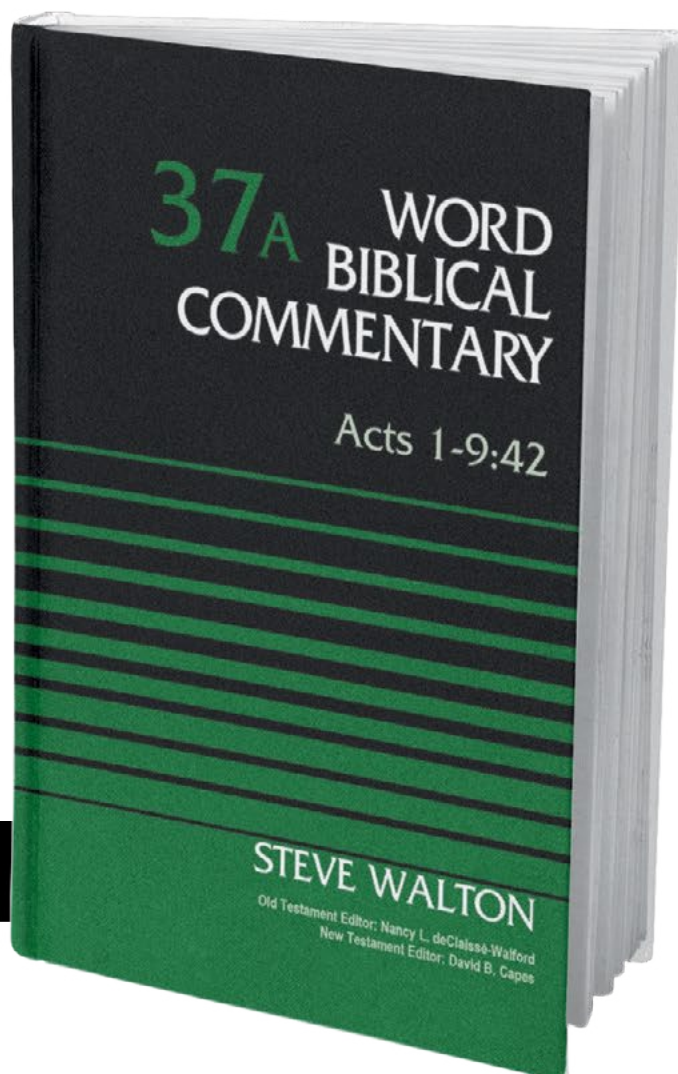
—Christoph W. Stenschke, Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, South Africa

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