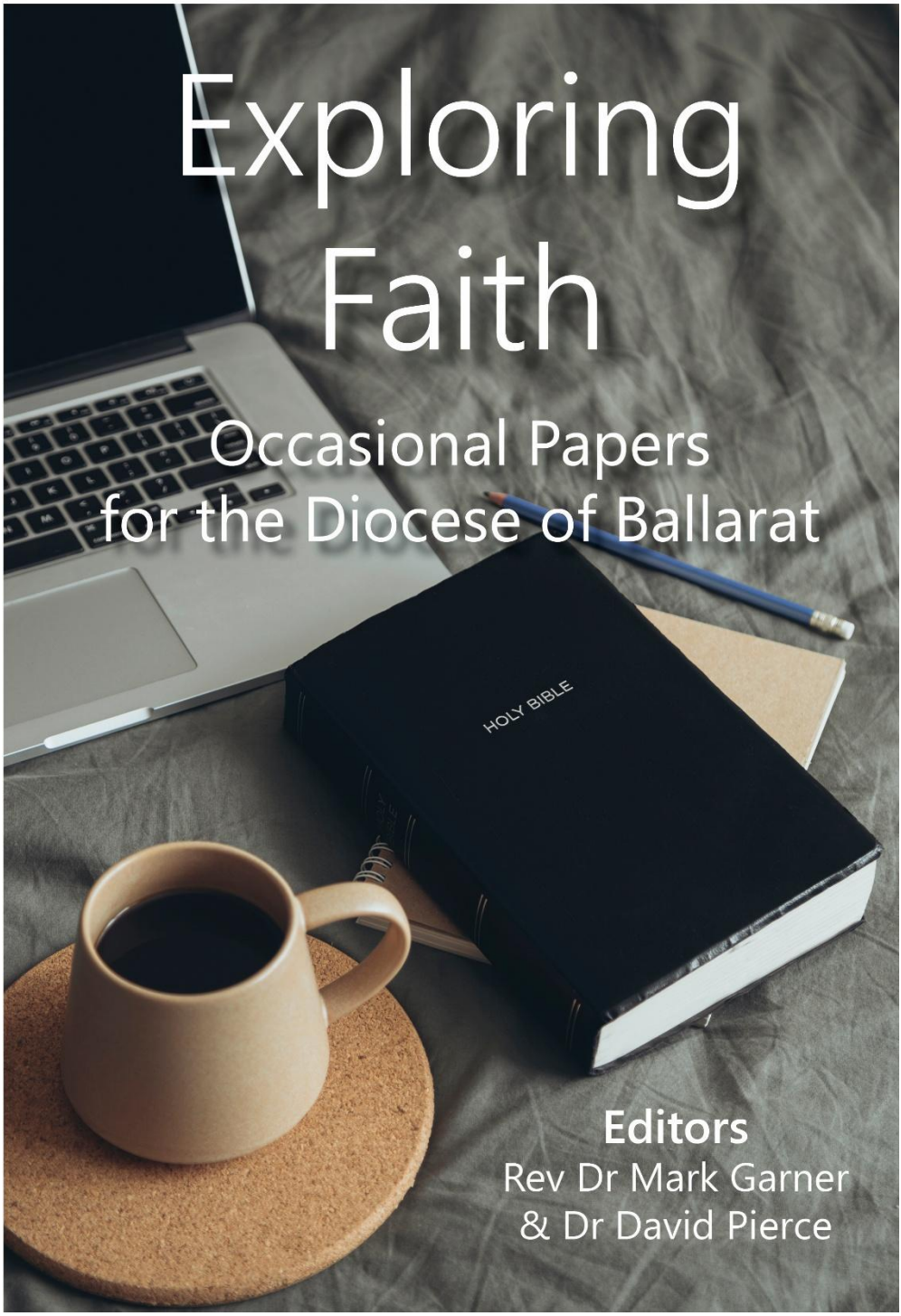
Exploring Faith

Occasional Papers for the Diocese of Ballarat



Editors
Rev Dr Mark Garner
& Dr David Pierce

Introduction

Exploring Faith is a new initiative of the diocesan Ministry Development Committee. Its aim is to provide an outlet for people within the Diocese of Ballarat to write out their thoughts and ideas relating to the Christian faith, and thus share them with others in the diocese. The papers will be made available across the diocese in both hard copy and online, on the diocesan website. Each edition will consist of some 4-6 contributions. It is called *Occasional* Papers because Exploring Faith will not be produced at specified times, but when the editors have received a sufficient number of publishable papers. (We hope this will be at least twice in each calendar year.)

Why produce these papers?

The purpose of Exploring Faith is to provide a platform for anyone who would like to make a contribution to contemporary attempts to understand the Christian faith, particularly (but not necessarily exclusively) within the context of Anglican churches. It is aimed at a wide readership, not simply at the clergy or people who enjoy exploring deep intellectual ideas. In other words, it is not intended as an academic theological journal, but as a sharing place, where 21st-century Christians can communicate their personal reflections with one another. We hope that it will give rise to personal responses in a range of readers throughout our parishes, and will stimulate them to interact and engage in helpful exchanges with one another.

How can I contribute a piece?

If you have particular thoughts about the faith and/or church life that you would like to share, try to write them out in a minimum of approximately 1,000 words and a maximum of approximately 3,000 words. Your written-out thoughts may take a variety of forms, such as: exciting insights you have been granted; interesting suggestions you want to propose; doubts you struggle with; things you find hard to understand; ways to resolve problematic ideas that you or others have encountered; and so on. Please present them as clearly and systematically as you can, using full sentences rather than bullet points. As far as possible, try to avoid jargon and technical terminology, so that any interested reader will find your paper easy to follow. If you are not confident in your ability as a writer, the editors will be happy to guide and advise you.

At the head of the first page write the title, and put your name (and, if you wish, your parish) underneath the title. If you do not want your name to appear, please put in its place a brief, anonymous description of yourself, for example:

Retired accountant, or Dairy farmer, Western Plains, or Student, theological college

When you feel your piece is ready to appear in Exploring Faith, submit it to the editors via email (addresses below).

What will happen then?

The editors will carefully read your paper and within a couple of weeks or so they will let you know of their decision. They may feel that it can be published as it is, without any revision. Or they may suggest some changes, to make it more accessible to the intended readership: you will be asked to rework it in the light of their suggestions, and any further thoughts you may have, and resubmit it at a convenient time.

If you have any questions or comments, please make contact with the editors:

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Papers

Differences between Christians' interpretations of the Bible

David Pierce and Mark Garner

Introduction

This paper will consider how differences in the understanding of certain aspects of Scripture interpretation arise and how we may respond to such differences in a positive and enriching way.

If we reflect on those in our community who identify as having Christian faith, there is much that is generally agreed upon among that group. Some issues, however, are associated with significant difference of view. Recently, we have seen passionately held different views being expressed about how we should respond to same-sex relationships. Whilst there are other issues of difference, this is perhaps the most prominent and, in many ways, most divisive, in our time. Christians come to different conclusions about what they believe the Bible says about such relationships and therefore how the church and its members should respond.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, pointed out that the church, in common with the wider community, does not do difference well; that we need to find ways that show we can disagree well and still love each other. He has also said that unity does not equal uniformity. It is unfortunate that all too often such differences are dismissed by a pejorative

designation of the person holding a differing view. Phrases such as not respecting the authority of the Bible or being a revisionist have been used by some in the church when referring to others in the church who hold a different view about how we should respond to same sex relationships.

Why do such differences of view appear between Christians?

When we read any words including those in the Bible, the process by which we attach a meaning to those words typically happens in a relatively automatic way; i.e. in a way that we are largely unaware of. We assume those words have a single, clear meaning, and usually feel we know what that meaning is. However, to approach the Bible in this way is at odds with how communication, whether between people or between God and us humans, works.

We often talk about communication in terms of "conveying a message", which we think of as similar to sending a parcel. I pack something in a box and put the box in the post. Assuming all goes well, the package is delivered to the addressee, who opens it and finds what I put in it. We think of communication in the same way: I "pack a message" into words, and "send the message" to someone, who then "unpacks" my words to find the message.

In fact, communication never works like this. What is physically sent from one person to another in spoken interaction is only the sounds uttered by the speaker, which travel through the air to the listener's ears. Having heard what was said, the hearer then has to construct a message from it. The message is made

by the hearer: it is strongly guided, but not inflexibly determined, by what has been said. When I speak, I can only try to ensure that the hearer's interpretation, is as close as possible to what I intended. The two are never identical. If the listener is satisfied that my words make sense, he or she will assure me of that, for example, with a nod and a "mmm" sound. If not, I will be asked to clarify what I meant.

The same sort of meaning-making by the recipient occurs when the communication is in writing. The writer's message is not simply delivered in its entirety into the reader's mind: the reader has to construct a relevant meaning from the words. When we read Scripture, these same principles apply. What we read are the words of an ancient writer, who centuries ago experienced a revelation from God of an important truth. The writer interpreted what God was revealing, then expressed that interpretation in the best way possible. Furthermore, it was expressed in a language very different from our own, which have been translated, introducing another level of interpretation. We, in turn, seek to understand the translation of what the author wrote down, so that we can in some way experience the original insight and be drawn closer to God.

Many Christians pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they read the Bible. This is very appropriate, but it is not a matter of asking the Spirit to override our interpretative processes, but to guide them. Our human minds are limited, and we need God's help to construct a meaning that is relevant to our particular needs and circumstances and will thus help us to grow spiritually. That is why two equally

committed Christians, who both respect the authority of Scripture and prayerfully seek guidance as they read it, may arrive at very different conclusions about the meaning of the same passage they have read.

How do we make sense of such differences without, as commonly happens, dismissing the other person's interpretation? We need to reflect on the process by which we link what we read in the Bible with our conclusions about how it is guiding our attitudes and responses to specific issues, for example same-sex relationships. Multiple factors (or variables) influence this process. These include the culture of the community in which we grew up, our intellectual capacity, education, life experience and current circumstances. Particularly influential in this regard is our experience of how the Bible passage being considered has been understood by others in the church, and the extent to which this understanding has been formalised by some as being a part of the tradition and teaching of the church.

Additionally, more subtle factors may be at play, including our mood at the time, our occupation, and current cultural framework with which we identify, and our political passions. Unless we pause and very carefully analyse our thinking and frameworks of reference, we will be unaware of these more subtle influences and their impact on our Biblical interpretation.

A further factor, of which we are generally entirely unconscious, is that we constantly try to ensure that the world we know makes sense to us. As a consequence, what we read in the Bible we interpret with the influences noted above is weighted in our brain to result in an interpretation that that makes most sense to each of us as an individual. This activity goes on in the front part of our brain; we are mostly quite unaware of the complexity of the process or the number and nature of factors that influence the outcome.

Given this range of variables from such a wide range of sources it is perhaps surprising, not that we disagree, but that we manage to agree about anything of significance. It is an interesting thought for those of Protestant persuasion, who feel attached to the reformers' dictum of sola scriptura, to reflect on how this dictum is operationalised. For example, two individuals who are equally committed to the principle that scripture is the primary or sole source of information upon which to make a theological decision may well arrive at differing views of a specific aspect of what scripture reveals or teaches. It is important to explore how this situation arose; which of the variables noted above led to the difference.

Theological difference emerging from varying interpretations of scripture may also emerge from another influence. When we approach a theological issue, seeking a scriptural text related to it, our interpretation may be subtly influenced by our current belief about the issue in question. Matters of faith often are associated with strong emotional as well as intellectual and spiritual attachments: frequently, those

assumed matters of faith are how we define ourselves. We may unconsciously make our interpretation such that it will maintain the status quo of our thinking, which is typically a more comfortable position than that of change. In much the same way as our mood at the time (whether we are happy or sad, etc.) subtly filters and influences our interpretation, so our current stance on an issue will subtly influence how we read. All too often we are unaware of these influences. The claim, fairly often reiterated in various parts of the church, that one must take the Bible as it *is*, at "face value", without human interpretation, is to ignore the many unavoidable factors that inevitably influence every attempt to understand what it says.

Responding to differences in interpretation

In the light of the foregoing, then, how should we respond to variations between Christians in interpreting Scripture? Such differences have been an almost constant feature of the history of the church from the earliest days (see, for example, Acts chapter 15); the tragedy is, that they have often resulted in schisms and mutual hostility between factions holding different views. Furthermore, the issues that give rise to disagreement change over time. It is in many cases difficult for contemporary Christians to understand why, even in quite recent history, a particular point was so important that it resulted in division, or why the disagreement was so bitter.

As Justin Welby said, the fact that differences of opinion may lead to antagonism is by no means limited to the church: it is a characteristic of human society in general. However, the outcomes tend to be more serious in the church. This probably arises from two features of Christian life. First, so much is at stake. When differences of opinion are seen at the time they arise as relating to eternal theological truth (even though to later generations they may seem to be relatively trivial), it is easy for each party to view the other as dangerous, heretical, etc., and to regard maintaining its own view as defending the faith. Secondly, simply to go one's own way and ignore differences is much harder within the church community than it is in wider social life. There is a sense of belonging and commitment to the church—whether the local church, the denomination, or even the worldwide church—and this is fundamental to members' identity. They are thus frequently in one another's company and reminded of the existence of alternative views.

Is it possible, then, for the church to be "a light on the hill": to provide wider society with positive means for dealing with difference? In many places in the gospels and epistles, there is a strong emphasis on the central role of love (*agape*) in our faith. Christian love is a conscious commitment to serve others, regardless of how we might feel about them on a personal level, including whether we agree with their views on any particular topic. That being so, we need to think of ways in which we can constantly remind ourselves of our commitment to them, and practical ways in which we can demonstrate it.

This is particularly important when it we differ from them in our views, which is the focus here. When we hear someone expound a view that is different from our own, how should we react in love?

An important first step is to ensure that we fully understand the other's view. It is too easy to make snap judgements and dismiss the alternative view on the basis of very little knowledge, without making the effort to grasp it in its entirety. We must ask the person holding the view to explain it in full, including exposition of the scriptural passage(s) from which it is derived, his/her interpretation of key words and phrases, and any personal reasons for adopting this view. It may be that, when we explore it in depth, we find we agree with most of it, and have reservations only about details. For instance, we may endorse the fundamental truth derived from scripture but disagree with the doctrinal or ethical implications derived from it. It is also possible that the view is, in fact, similar to our own, but was expressed in a way that caused us to misunderstand. We should also take the opportunity humbly to examine our own, conflicting, view. We all have a tendency to normalise our own beliefs and behaviour: we think of them as patently obvious and therefore assume they are correct. It is at this point helpful for us to stop and carefully, thoroughly, and with an open mind examine our thinking as well as the interpretation that is different from our own. This may lead us to modify our thinking in some way, or at least to enhance our sense that, for us at this time, it is appropriate.

Nevertheless, it may well become clear from the other's explanation of this particular interpretation of Scripture that we disagree with it. In that case, a constructive next step is to consider honestly and openly whether there is anything we can learn from our differences. Justin Welby exhorted believers to move away from thinking simply in terms of right and wrong and accept, in the words of St Paul, that

We look through a glass dimly … The knowledge that I have now is imperfect; then [i.e., when I am with the Lord] I shall know as fully as I am known.".

If each of us understands only partially, there is great potential for us to deepen each other's imperfect understandings by sharing and exploring them. We must accept that ideas may be valid for one person and different ideas may be equally valid for another.

This is not to avoid the issue by means of a weak compromise, but quite the reverse. It takes humility and spiritual strength to accept that I cannot understand the totality of God's truth; indeed, to do so is beyond the capacity of even the greatest human mind. Furthermore, I can never know another person, or even myself, in full. Only God does that; let us ask for the grace to leave judgement to him. Accepting that there may be equally valid different interpretations of particular passages of scripture does not come naturally to many of us but can be creative and enriching for us. It can be stimulating and instructive for us to encounter ways of thinking that are foreign to us. We can learn from the experience without accepting the

view. We can be stronger, not weaker, through accepting the validity of difference. Even if we believe the other's interpretation is fundamentally wrong, we must agree to disagree. Throughout the New Testament, great stress is laid on showing love to all human beings; we must behave towards any Christian with whose interpretation we differ as a fellow-member, however misguided, of the Body of Christ.

Throughout its history, the church has struggled, and usually failed, to cope with different interpretations of the Bible. Far too often differences have led to schism. At the very least, the disagreeing parties have withdrawn, spiritually, socially, and usually physically from one another. At times the response has been even more destructive, expressed in mutual antagonism, public condemnation, physical mistreatment, and even open warfare. Such responses are indefensible. In this paper, we have argued that differences of interpretation are inherent in our faith, and if we approach them in a positive spirit they can deepen our insight into that faith, thus strengthening our discipleship. Even when, with the best and most determined intentions, this does not occur, we must ensure that, while rejecting the idea, we do not reject the person who holds it.

About our attitude towards the Scriptures

Michael Tilbury

Introduction

I make two preliminary observations.

First, these notes are simply my own thoughts on important topics that appear to command a great deal of scholarship, of which I am largely ignorant. Hopefully, my thoughts, assertions, assumptions and doubts will contribute to our thinking and sharing on this important topic. In his book, *What do we do with the Bible?* (SPCK 2019), Richard Rohr says that you must always declare your methodology or pattern of interpreting if you want to be taken seriously. I don't know enough to be taken seriously, and I can't claim a developed methodology. Nor would I necessarily want to do so, as it would interfere with the whole point of reading the Bible in the first place.. (This is discussed further below.) The only claim I make as a justification for writing these notes is that it's my belief that the uninformed (i.e., me!) can sometimes contribute to debates that have become very inward-looking and self-referential.

Secondly, the topic inevitably engages questions about authority (why should we regard the Bible as an authoritative source in matters of religious belief?) and about interpretation (how should we interpret the Bible?). These two intertwined

subjects are enormous in themselves, and both feature in Harvey Cox's book, *How to Read the Bible* (HarperOne, 2016).

What IS our attitude?

As Christians, our attitude towards Scripture is largely formed by, and dependent on, the institutional framework within which we worship. For us Anglicans, that framework takes two principal forms. First, the Scriptural readings in the Eucharist and other liturgies – readings that focus on relevant events in the liturgical calendar and that are supplemented by sermons expounding their meaning. Secondly, individual or group Bible study (perhaps in organized groups at various times in the liturgical year). The average churchgoer is thus likely to be exposed to the Bible at least once a week in an institutional setting and to be familiar with the major themes of the great Biblical events as they are celebrated in the course of the liturgical year. And the churchgoer who wants more can get more through increased attendance at church, and through organized or individual study.

Whatever form our exposure to Scripture takes, I think that the average churchgoer would regard the Bible as having some authority in, or at least influence on, their lives. It does this in at least two ways: as the source of their knowledge of God and of God's plan for humanity (particularly Jesus' role in that plan); and as a source of wisdom, moral and ethical instruction, and inspiration. This reflects the familiar words of the Bible itself: 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for

reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness'. (2 Timothy 3:16)

The exact nature of the authority or influence that the Bible has on the average churchgoer's life would, however, be difficult to describe. It tends to remain somewhat amorphous and undefined. It would also be subject to change from time to time as the individual's own reasoning and conscience developed in its interaction with the Bible and its exposition in church. In the absence of an autocratic, authoritarian or centralized church, it is difficult to imagine that it could be otherwise.

Historically, however, it was otherwise. In the theocracy that was the medieval Church – and, with qualification since the Second Vatican Council, that is still the Roman Catholic Church – Scripture was and is mediated, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. This occurs by authoritative interpretations in church doctrines and teachings that form the foundation of churchgoers' lives. Ironically, the same is true, but in a different way, of those churches that we now describe as fundamentalist. In these churches, the authority of the Church is replaced by the authority of the Bible, viewed as the (more or less literal) words of God, which contain commands and doctrines that govern all those aspects of the individual believer's life. It is assumed that the meaning of God's word is within the grasp of every true believer. A renowned evangelical theologian describes the biblical approach to Scripture as follows:

> Its text is word for word God given; its message is an organic unity, the infallible Word of an infallible God, a web of revealed truths centred upon Christ; it must be interpreted in its natural sense, on the assumption of its inner harmony; and its meaning can be grasped only by those who humbly seek and gladly receive the help of the Holy Spirit. (J I Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles: Intervarsity Fellowship*, 1958, pp. 113—114)

This suggests that the Word of God has been converted into a material thing for analytical purposes.

What COULD our attitude be?

There are groups within Anglicanism which actively pursue the goal of taking the whole Communion in an evangelical direction: a prominent example is GAFCON. Such groups would challenge the view I have expressed above, about the relationship between the average churchgoer and the Bible. They would argue that the role of the Bible in the life of a Christian is paramount. This view provides a background against which to consider the question of what our attitude to the Scriptures *could* be. The answer to that question needs at least two perspectives: the institutional and the personal.

The institutional involves the Church's official response. After all, the average churchgoer's attitude to the Bible derives from the Church's official position on the status of Scripture. The *39 Articles of Religion* (1571) form the foundational compact of the Anglican Communion. Article VI—which I think still forms

part of the priestly oath—formally states the general position of the Church that 'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation', so that no one is compelled to accept as an article of faith something that is not found in, or provable by, the Scriptures. The *Articles* expressly reject some pre-Reformation doctrines on the grounds that they have no place in Scripture, for example the 'vain' 'Romish' doctrines relating to Purgatory (Article XXII), or that they cannot be 'proved by holy Writ', for example the doctrine of Transubstantiation (Article XXVIII).

Fundamentalists' reformulation of this is typically subtle but disruptive. GAFCON, or Global Anglican Future Conference, is a movement formed in 2008 with the stated aims of addressing a lack of Biblical and moral standards in the Anglican church. Tenet 2 of GAFCON's *Jerusalem Declaration* (2018) reads:

> We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God written to contain all things necessary to salvation. The Bible is to be translated, read, preached, taught and obeyed in its plain and canonical sense, respectful of the church's historic and consensual reading.

Thus, unlike the *39 Articles, the Jerusalem Declaration* contains both a definition of Scripture ('the Word of God written to contain all things necessary to salvation'), and a statement of how it is to be understood ('in its plain and canonical sense'). It thus gives a definable, concrete form to the concept of the Bible, in a manner that most evangelicals would recognize.

The broad analytical reason for doing so is not hard to find. It is to reject, as contrary to the Word of God, any unwanted influence that modern developments in science, society and scholarship have had on the cultural world views (such as those relating to gender roles) that were dominant at periods in which the Scriptures were written.

For the Anglican Communion this raises the question of authority. Which view of the authority of the Bible is the 'correct' one? This, in turn, raises the question of how the Bible is to be interpreted. In order to consider the issue through the lens of the average churchgoer, I think we need to focus on the process involved in Bible reading (beyond its liturgical setting) as it is understood by many Christians, including many evangelicals and those in the mystic tradition (see Rohr's What do we do with the Bible? Pp 64—67). The first thing to note is that we exercise a choice to read, or not to read, the Bible. This may be explained simply as a habit we have adopted through life, perhaps influenced by our confirmation bias, or by the observation that our Lord Himself cited Scripture. The second thing to note is most important: that choice involves an engagement with God. God never forces us to that engagement. But we do need Him to open the Scriptures to us, just as on the road to Emmaus after His Resurrection, Jesus opened the Scriptures to Cleopas and the unknown disciple, who, arguably, represent all of us (Luke 24:13-35). The process begins with God because, in the words of J I Packer: 'The Bible assumes throughout that God must first disclose Himself

before men can know Him.' (*The New Bible Dictionary* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1962), p.1091.

There is a wealth of Biblical authority supporting this view. Without forcing the process into the sequence of days, hours, and so on, what happens seems to be that God has an open and on-going invitation to engage with Him. We respond in faith and honesty to this invitation, and we receive a type of 'inward enlightenment', which I take to be the moment at which we come to an understanding of the text. This is s moment at which we can respond that 'we've got it', that 'it clicks'; it corresponds to the moments when Cleopas and the unknown disciple were 'burning within' as Jesus expounded the Scriptures (Luke 24:32). This accords with the experience of those who have written about their 'inward enlightenment', at least at the point of conversion, rather than simply on a reading of the Scriptures. See, for example, C S Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Wm Collins 1955) chapters 14 & 15.

I have four observations relevant to this. First, if the way in which I am coming to understand the process of reading the Scriptures is correct, then, while continuing to rejoice in our sacramental and liturgical heritage, I think we average churchgoers should take Scripture reading a lot more seriously than we currently do. That understanding requires us to merge reading with contemplation and prayer, making it a humble 'request' (see C S Lewis, *How to Pray: Reflections and Essays*, Wm Collins, 2018) to God to lead us to understand what He is trying to tell us through His Word. For most, if not all, of us, there is surely no better way of focussing the mind on God

than through prayerful meditation on the Scriptures. This may require much more silent 'retreat' than we are accustomed to. In this respect, we Anglicans may have a lot to learn from others, lest Bible reading and prayer dissolve into mere practice, habit or ritual.

Secondly, whilst I think that the process of reading the Bible precludes an approach based on any predetermined assumptions, I don't think that, from a perspective of theology or of human reasoning, it requires us to engage in a process other than one of careful reading that seeks to discover the true meaning, the essence, of the text. This may involve research: it may mean appreciating the genre and context of what we are reading, as well as the cross-references that are involved and implied in it. At least for me, that often involves reference to concordances, commentaries, dictionaries, and scholarship. I enjoy this 'work'. I appreciate that many (perhaps most!) don't. But I honestly don't think that it matters. Take, as an example, our Lord's Summary of the Law (Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 27:25-28; see also Gal 5:14). When challenged to identify the greatest commandment. Jesus' answer is that there are two: to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves. The meaning of this is obvious without commentary. It provides everyone who reads it with a broad yet sufficient blueprint for life. It can be acted on immediately, though its application in particular circumstances may call for deep reflection. Since all the law and the prophets now hang on these two commandments. It does not matter that these implications may not be immediately appreciated, or, indeed,

that they will never be appreciated as such. The Summary has already had a practical effect on the life of the average churchgoer.

Thirdly – and this follows from the last point – I don't think that prayerful consideration of the meaning of the Scriptures will necessarily lead two readers to exactly the same meaning. If one accepts that, in the ideal situation, God is revealing the meaning of Scripture to the reader, one must also accept the nature of the revelation. It must be true because it comes from God. But 'truth' can be viewed from many angles. I hope it is clear that I am not suggesting there is any such thing as 'my truth'. And I can't see any objection to the view that God may reveal the truth in different ways, often only partially, to people whose spiritual journeys are at different levels.

Fourthly, we can in this life have only a limited understanding of the overall truth of God. I suggest that we should have nothing to do with any views founded on a medieval authoritarianism that produces apparent certainty in commandments, doctrines and rules through judgemental language like 'error' and 'unorthodoxy', with all the threats they imply. Certainty is, at least to some extent, the result of an attempt to apply perceived scientific analysis to the Scriptures. Such attitudes are found, for example, in GAFCON's *Jerusalem Declaration*: Tenet 11, in effect, excommunicates unorthodox Anglican clergy and Tenet 13 states that unorthodox churches and leaders have no authority. Such unequivocal assertions are simply the stuff of conflict and hatred.

Conclusion: problems raised by this paper

As a final observation, I can sense two problems in what I have written. The first might be referred to as *Methodology and 'revelation'*. As a discipline, theology bothers me. Sometimes when I'm reading it, I think it's not a serious discipline at all, but a flight of fancy. That's because it accepts that we know nothing about God except what He has made known to us in revelation, especially through the life and teachings of Jesus. It's not unreasonable for the average person today to conclude that theology is really about nothing because there can be no certainty about what Jesus' life was or what it meant. That's not my view. But I do wonder about the extent to which 'revelation' can be a source of human reasoning—and we can reason in no other way. That doesn't, however, mean that we can't be spiritual.

Paul, in his teaching on methodology (1 Corinthians 1:18-31), distinguishes the wisdom of God from human wisdom. In verse 23 Paul suggests that the premise of divine revelation is that 'we proclaim Christ crucified'. It has been suggested that we should take the Resurrection of Jesus, an established fact, as the starting point of our reasoning. (In contrast, Richard Rohr's starting point seems to be the Incarnation: see *What do we do with the Bible?* [SPCK 2019], pp. 31—33; 49 ff.) If we accept the Crucifixion, Resurrection or Incarnation as premises based on fact, there does not seem to be any objection to using deduction, induction or analogy, even though it is all human reasoning. However, if these cannot be established as historical facts, are they simply matters that we have to accept as

revelation? If yes, how can human reasoning be applied in part to divine revelation? Can one just switch between various types of reasoning?

I ask these questions because, subject to some doubts, the most common view is that knowledge is justified true belief (JTB) – i.e., something, whether fact or opinion, is true if, we have a JTB. If our belief is not based on the best evidence, it is not justified and can't satisfy the test. Personally, I don't have a problem with accepting as fact the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection – or, indeed, the miracles, etc. That's what I was taught, and there was then a celebrated book by Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Faber & Faber Press, 1930, and several later editions) to 'prove' it all!

The second problem I am aware of is Defining *'Scripture'*. I decided not to try to define 'the Scriptures'. The Old Testament books that form part of the canon of the Bible are listed in the *39 Articles* and do not contain the Apocrypha (listed separately), but the Jerome Bible includes the latter in the canon, so there is some disagreement about which books should be in the Bible. Putting aside theoretical questions about the authority of the canon, this is not a major issue. It is, however, marginally relevant in this way. The average churchgoer will value some parts of Scripture more than others – e.g., the New Testament more than much of the Old Testament. Yet, even in the New Testament, Revelation is problematic for some Christians. The highlight will, of course, remain the Gospel accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, and those parts of Paul's sublime writings that essentially form

part of the Western literary canon. But some of Paul's other writings, particularly those relating to gender and his perceived whingeing, may be regarded as problematic. There are in a number of places in the Bible passages that we find either highly obscure or offensive to read (or both). I have noticed a tendency in our liturgies simply to omit such 'nasty bits'; I do not personally like them, but it concerns me that omitting them is the beginning of a trend to refashion the Bible in a way that will appeal to modern audiences. For example, the intention may be to present it as being all about heart-warming (even a little romanticised) love, rather than the tough love to which both the testaments bear witness. We should openly face up to the crucial question of whether it is to any extent legitimate to be selective about which parts of the Bible we read and address in church. Is it proper to deal only with those parts that accord with modern tastes and understandings, and to avoid any portions of the Bible that seem to make no sense at all to the average churchgoer?

The Aesthetics of Silence: Visual Theopoetics in the Aftermath of Clerical Child Sexual Abuse

Dr Alexandra Banks

When Words Fail: How Ribbons Tell Stories of Trauma

Standing at the gate of a former Catholic primary school in a regional Australian city, you can feel a palpable sense of disconnect. The haunting of lost futures continues to hang heavy in the air, even years after a national Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse reported its findings. The Commission discovered that this school, one of four Catholic institutions run by the Christian Brothers in the 1970s, was an epicentre of clerical child sexual abuse. During this period, every male staff member at the school—whether Christian Brother or Catholic priest—engaged in sexually abusing primary school-aged boys.

The extent of abuse in this regional city was staggering. The Royal Commission uncovered not just isolated incidents but a systematic network of abuse that spanned decades. Between this primary school and its associated secondary college, a clerical paedophile ring operated with apparent impunity. What made this particularly devastating was the complicity of the institution that was meant to provide spiritual guidance

and protection. When asked to comment on the Commission's findings, the local Catholic Bishop acknowledged "that the history of child abuse in [the] diocese hangs over the community like a dark cloud." This acknowledgment, while important, did little to address the physical reminders of trauma that still stand in the community.

In the aftermath of the Royal Commission, survivors and the local community repeatedly called for the demolition of the small schoolhouse and adjacent presbytery, which had afforded the clerical paedophile ring unfettered access to young boys. These buildings weren't just structures of brick and mortar but sites where innocence was stolen and lives forever altered. Instead of honouring these requests for demolition and the creation of a memorial site, a childcare centre was established in the same buildings that witnessed horrific abuse—a decision that many survivors experienced as yet another institutional betrayal.

Today, the fence lines of the secondary college, the local cathedral, and multiple primary schools—like many other sites of abuse in this city and surrounding parish schools—continue to be covered with ribbons of varying colours, lengths, and stages of decay. These ribbons of the LOUD fence movement persist in silently pointing to all the unnamed victims and the legacy of shame, humiliation, and guilt that continues to wound the community.

The Double Betrayal: Understanding Spiritual Trauma

To understand the significance of the LOUD fence movement, we must first recognise the unique nature of clerical abuse trauma. Sexual abuse by clergy creates what former Catholic priest Thomas Doyle calls a "double betrayal." Survivors experience betrayal not only by a trusted person but by the God personified in that person.

When God's Representatives Become Predators

In Catholic theology, priests are understood to stand in the place of Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church's canonical legislation outlines that priests have the authority on earth as outlined in paragraph 1548, which creates a profound power dynamic. As Dr. Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea explained to U.S. Catholic Bishops in 2002: "The sexual violation of a child or adolescent by a priest is incest. It is a sexual and relational transgression perpetrated by THE father of the child's extended family, a man in whom the child is taught from birth to trust above everyone else in his life, to trust second only to God."

This theological dimension compounds the trauma in ways that secular abuse does not. The priest not only violates the child physically but also mediates the victim's relationship with God, alienating them from their spiritual identity. Many survivors report that perpetrators justified their behaviour by claiming they were fulfilling "God's will." This manipulation of

faith adds another layer of violation—one that attacks not just the body but the soul.

Spiritual Homelessness

The Australian framework for understanding trauma explicitly recognises spiritual/religious abuse alongside physical and psychological trauma. This broader definition acknowledges how religious authority can be weaponised through manipulation and coercive control. For survivors, distinguishing between the religious beliefs they once held and those used to manipulate them becomes nearly impossible.

Child victims of religious abuse often become disassociated from their spiritual and religious communities, feeling they exist beyond the boundaries of Christian communion. They experience what some scholars describe as "spiritual homelessness"—cut off from faith communities that were once central to their identity yet still haunted by religious imagery and concepts that have become entwined with their trauma.

The dogmatic entanglement of the priest's identity with Jesus contributes to survivors experiencing ongoing distress and may delay their seeking support. How does one report abuse when the abuser is seen as God's representative? How does one pray when prayer itself has been corrupted? These questions illustrate why conventional therapeutic and testimonial approaches may fall short for survivors of clerical abuse.

Beyond Words: Finding New Languages for Trauma

American psychiatrist Judith Herman describes trauma as unfolding in three stages: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and disclosure. While disclosure is often seen as the first step in healing, survivors of clerical child sexual abuse face unique barriers to telling their stories. The double betrayal experienced at the hands of clergy, coupled with institutional resistance to hearing their accounts, creates profound challenges.

Trauma itself disrupts the ability to form coherent narratives. Traumatic memories often exist as fragmented, non-verbal impressions—sensory flashbacks, physical reactions, and disconnected images rather than logical storylines. When institutions actively resist hearing these stories, survivors must find alternative ways to bear witness to their experiences.

This is where theopoetics offers a crucial framework. As theological scholar Rebecca Chopp explains, theopoetics provides a way to honour "the social imposition of silence within the sphere of profound suffering while creating space for alternative forms of witness." It acknowledges that some experiences exceed conventional language and require different forms of expression.

For survivors caught in the aftermath of clerical child sexual abuse, traditional testimonial frameworks often prove inadequate. The LOUD fence movement exemplifies what Chopp terms a "poetics of testimony"—allowing survivors to

communicate truth through means beyond conventional verbal or textual frameworks.

Ribbons as Testimony: The LOUD Fence Movement

The origins of the LOUD fence movement began in Ballarat as a community response to the revelations of widespread clerical abuse. The name itself—LOUD—starkly contrasts the forced silence survivors endured for decades. What began as a simple act of tying colourful ribbons to the fences of Catholic institutions has evolved into a powerful visual language that speaks where words fail.

The ribbons tied to institutional fences serve multiple profound purposes:

1. As counter-liturgical practice: The act of tying ribbons subverts sacred spaces that were previously sites of abuse and institutional silencing. The ribbons transform church boundaries into public testimony. Each ribbon challenges the institution's control over who can speak and what can be said within sacred spaces.

2. As embodied trauma response: The need to constantly replace weathered ribbons mirrors the persistent nature of trauma symptoms that Herman and theological scholar Shelly Rambo describe as "pain that does not go away." Just as trauma returns in flashbacks and nightmares, survivors return to the fences, replacing faded ribbons with new ones—a

physical enactment of the ongoing nature of their experience.

3. As communal witness: The ribbons create what cultural memory scholar Alison Atkinson-Phillips calls "communities of memory"—transforming private suffering into public testimony without requiring verbal articulation. Each ribbon represents an individual story, yet together they form a collective statement that cannot be ignored.

4. As theological resistance: By marking sacred spaces with secular symbols, survivors challenge the institutional church's control over testimony and truth-telling about abuse. The ribbons create what theologian Rebecca Chopp terms a "poetics of resistance"—creating new theological meanings through material practice rather than traditional doctrinal discourse.

The Power of Ritual in Reclaiming Agency

The repetitive nature of tying ribbons to church fences has become a ritualized practice that reclaims agency at sites of abuse. French theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet wrote that "ritual erects a barrier against the forces of death which relentlessly threatens to destroy a group's identity and their significance in the world." Through this lens, the ribbons represent both protest and a form of sacred witness outside institutional control.

For survivors whose bodies and spiritual identities were violated within church structures, the physical act of approaching these buildings to tie ribbons represents an act of courage and reclamation. They are no longer passive victims but active witnesses, transforming the very boundaries that once contained their abuse into platforms for their testimony.

The Significance of Impermanence

What makes the ribbons particularly powerful is their material nature. Their fragility and impermanence reflect the vulnerability of abuse survivors, while their need for constant renewal mirrors the persistent nature of trauma. Unlike permanent monuments, which can freeze trauma in time, the ongoing act of replacing ribbons represents an active, living testimony that refuses to be forgotten.

This impermanence serves another purpose—it requires the continued engagement of the community. Each weathered ribbon that must be replaced demands new hands, new witnesses, new participants in the act of remembering. The memory work becomes a communal responsibility rather than an individual burden.

In 2016, when the Catholic Church proposed a permanent memorial in Armidale, New South Wales, survivors protested both its permanence and secluded location. The Church claimed they were "responding to the needs of their members" while failing to consider survivors' needs. This tension between institutional and survivor-led approaches reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of trauma testimony. The

survivors' preference for transient, visible ribbons over fixed, hidden memorials demonstrates how the repetitive act of renewal serves as both ritual resistance and ongoing witness.

Sacred Resistance: From Purple Dye to LOUD Fence Ribbons

The LOUD fence movement shares significant parallels with other forms of visual testimony against institutional power. During South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, the "Purple Shall Govern" movement emerged after police used purple dye to mark protesters for arrest. Demonstrators reclaimed this marking by intentionally spraying government buildings with the same purple dye, transforming a symbol of oppression into one of resistance.

Similarly, the LOUD fence ribbons transform markers of institutional power into symbols of witness. In both cases, communities created visual languages that challenged power structures while building new forms of community and memory.

The ribbons create what South African theologian Denise Ackermann calls a "language of lament"—a form of expression that refuses to be silenced in the face of suffering. Like the psalms of lament in biblical tradition, they transform private sorrow into public witness while creating new possibilities for hope and healing.

Visual Poetics as Theological Witness

The ribbons of the LOUD fence movement create a powerful visual testimony through their aesthetic presence and symbolic meaning. They serve dual purposes: they mark spaces of trauma while simultaneously reclaiming these spaces through collective acts of memory and witness.

As communal artifacts, they externalise trauma memories that are often too difficult to verbalise, creating a shared visual language of witness. The physical properties of the ribbons—their movement, texture, and impermanence—mirror aspects of trauma experience while also suggesting possibilities for transformation.

What is unique about the ritualistic tying of ribbons to boundary fences is that the action draws on sensory and communal dimensions of expression. While the Eucharist draws Catholic worshippers' senses and bodies into the act of worship, the ribbons repeatedly draw survivors' bodies and senses to the fence where their hurt and pain are acknowledged rather than denied. Here, they encounter the fragmented laments of other survivors in the unity of silent petitions offered in search of hope and transformation.

Lessons for Institutional Response

The experience of the LOUD fence movement provides critical insights into how institutions, particularly religious ones, might better respond to abuse survivors. When clerical institutions have attempted to control the narrative through official apologies or statements, these efforts have often fallen short in

the eyes of survivors. The ribbons represent a counter-narrative that institutional rhetoric cannot manage or contain.

What might churches learn from these ribbon-tied fences? First, they might recognise the importance of visible, public acknowledgment. Hidden apologies or private reconciliation processes, while perhaps well-intentioned, can replicate the dynamics of silencing that enabled abuse. Second, they might understand that healing from spiritual trauma requires new theological languages and practices that emerge from survivors rather than institutional authorities.

The ribbons demonstrate that genuine reconciliation cannot be achieved through official statements alone but requires ongoing, embodied practices of witness and remembrance. They challenge churches to relinquish control over how abuse is remembered and testified to—a profound shift in institutional power dynamics.

The LOUD fence movement has spread beyond Ballarat to other communities across Australia and internationally. Each location adapts the practice to their specific contexts while maintaining the core symbolism of ribbons as testimony. This adaptability shows how visual poetics can transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, creating a universal language for trauma testimony.

In Ireland, ribbons have appeared on church gates following revelations about mother and baby homes. In Canada, similar practices have emerged around former residential schools where Indigenous children suffered abuse. These parallel movements suggest a growing recognition of the limits of conventional testimony and the need for alternative witness practices in the aftermath of institutional abuse.

The global resonance of these practices demonstrates how material symbols can create solidarity across different contexts of trauma. They form a visual language of witness that communicates across geographical, cultural, and even time barriers.

A Way Forward

The LOUD fence movement offers important lessons for how communities might better respond to trauma testimony. The ribbons demonstrate how visual poetics can create spaces for testimony that honour the unspeakable nature of trauma and survivors' need to bear witness.

By reconceptualising testimony beyond traditional verbal frameworks, the ribbons provide survivors with alternative pathways to bear witness when conventional testimonial forms prove inadequate or are actively suppressed. This is particularly significant for survivors of clerical abuse, whose trauma involves not only personal violation but spiritual displacement.

Hope in Fragments

What makes the LOUD Fence movement so powerful is its challenge to institutional power and its creation of new possibilities for healing. Through the simple act of tying ribbons, survivors and their supporters transform spaces of trauma into sites of witness, resistance, and even hope.

This hope is not, as theologian Logan Jones writes, "a cheap hope that can be easily confused with optimism. Rather, it is a hope wrought in relationship and trust." In the aftermath of trauma, particularly child sexual abuse, the essential nature of trust is in question with every new encounter. The ribbons create a bridge back to trust—not in the institutions that failed them, but in the community that refuses to forget.

The movement suggests broader implications for how religious institutions might respond to histories of abuse. Rather than focusing solely on verbal testimonies and institutional processes, churches might consider how to create spaces for alternative forms of witness—ones that honour the embodied, fragmented nature of trauma experience while allowing for communal healing.

As churches globally continue to grapple with histories of abuse, the intersection of visual testimony, ritual, and trauma offers rich ground for developing more survivor-centred approaches to testimony, healing, and institutional transformation. The LOUD fence ribbons show us that sometimes, when words fail, other forms of witness emerge—forms that may prove more durable, more visible, and ultimately more transformative than conventional language alone.

Original sin:
an important idea in our world

Rev'd Dr Mark Garner

Introduction

Historically, the principles by which our Western societies are governed, and the underlying attitudes which influenced the cultural ideas and practices that developed in them, were drawn from Christian perspectives. However, religious perspectives, attitudes and ideas are today not shared by the large majority; they are increasingly either completely ignored or at least regarded as old-fashioned and irrelevant in the 21st-century world. It is, therefore, common to describe our contemporary society as 'secular'. This presumed secular nature of society is typically seen as either a very good thing or a shame, depending on one's standpoint, but it is not often challenged.

Despite the widespread assumption that society is secular, it is clearly true that religion, particularly Christianity, continues to be practised by a noticeable minority. Among the majority this tends to be regarded as a historical hangover, which must not be allowed to influence the institutions of state, or to determine what are, and are not, acceptable attitudes and behaviour in the culture. Many would concede that religion is a matter of personal choice and private preference. It is a harmless fantasy, which may even contribute to some people's

emotional wellbeing. Others hold a more negative view: religion is on a par with ancient beliefs in fairies and dragons; it is irrational and contrary to the spirit of scientific inquiry. It has no place in the modern world. However indulgent or hostile their attitude towards religion is, however, possibly a large majority of people in our society regard it as irrelevant to social values.

It troubles me, and many Christian friends, that each succeeding generation seems to be more ignorant of, and sceptical towards, faith than the preceding generation. Is there anything we can do to enhance the role of our faith in this troubled world? I believe there is, but we need a thoughtful and caring approach towards our society's deep-seated secularism. However strange it may seem, I suggest that our approach can be based on the often overlooked doctrine of original sin.

Sinfulness

There is, of course, no place for the concept of sinfulness in a secular world, and yet sin is a constant element of human experience which those who do not support religious ideas simply cannot ignore. It is probably fair to say that, within Christian thinking, the understanding of the term 'sin' is generally unproblematic, although it is very differently emphasised in various branches of the church. 'Original sin' (or, more helpfully, 'innate sinfulness') is fundamental to this understanding: in other words, every human has a constant tendency to commit sin, and we are unable through our own

efforts to free ourselves from this tendency. Many secular thinkers dismiss this as mere pessimism, as it overlooks the many good characteristics of humans and the positive achievements of our race. Some Christians would agree. In fact, however, the doctrine of original sin is not gloomy pessimism: it is not concerned with (and therefore does not negate) the excellence of many human achievements. Rather, it is both an explanation for, and a positive response to, the manifest moral and spiritual failings of all humanity. Innate sinfulness is, in fact, an optimistic doctrine: it explains the cause of our repeated sins and assures us that there is an eternal remedy for them. If we repent and confess, God is unfailingly ready to forgive us and help us to live a more worthy life. In the words of the General Confession:

> Merciful God, … we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have failed to do … we repent and are truly sorry for all our sins. Father, forgive us. Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life

But what do we mean by 'sin'? We too easily tend to think of sin as harmful (and, in particular, criminal) actions towards others, such as lying, deliberately giving offence, verbally abusing, stealing, and committing murder. Sinners are those who commit such evil things. The Biblical understanding of sin is much more comprehensive, however. All human beings are sinners, and to sin is not to live up to God's standards. The Roman Catholic tradition identifies seven "deadly" sins: pride, greed, wrath, lust, envy, gluttony, and sloth. Even if people who

hold such attitudes do not directly affect others at all, they are still committing sin. In Paul's words (Romans 3;23), to sin is to fall short of God's glory. (The Greek word for sin most commonly used in the New Testament means "missing the mark".) We begin the Prayer of General Confession with "We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have failed to do …

The Bible repeatedly states that there is something inherently wrong with all of humanity, something that makes every one of us slide easily into pursuing self-interest, regardless of the consequences for others. This is a revelation: it explains what thoughtful people have wondered about since time immemorial: obvious and ever-present imperfections of human nature. We constantly, and usually unwittingly, cause mental, social, and at times physical harm to one another. Discomfort, sadness, and distress seem to be inseparable from life on this earth, and occasionally give rise to tragedy and horror on a massive scale.

Human perfectibility

One claim frequently made by secularist thinkers is that the rapid and far-reaching advances in human knowledge have begun to reduce, and provide remedies for, instances of what Christians call sin. In this view, sins are vestiges of a past that is being superseded by intellectual and socio-political advances. Humanity is perfectible through its own efforts. There is no doubt that careful thought, particularly as evidenced in scientific method, has made extraordinary contributions to

knowledge, and its applications have resulted in benefits to human life that can scarcely be overstated. It has also, however, been—and continues to be—misused for bad ends, in which scientists themselves have often been complicit. This is perhaps most evident in totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany, but no less deplorable is the exploitation of science for improper commercial and political ends in modern liberal societies. It is noticeable, for example, how rapidly new discoveries and inventions are adopted by the armed forces in order to make their power even more destructive. Against this background, the optimistic notions that of itself science is an untainted model for all inquiry and intellectual achievement, and that it will eventually resolve all philosophical and social problems, are untenable. All honest thinkers, whether secularist or Christian, accept these facts, but they differ in what they infer from them.

Whereas Christians see these facts of life as clear evidence of original sin, secularists seek alternative interpretations. Along with the "hangovers from the past" view mentioned above, the significance of most sins is minimised and relativised. They are no more than condonable mistakes and misjudgements on a par with, for example, a miskick in football or a typographical error. This view has unfortunately been adopted at times by the church, when the doctrine of original sin—the soul's permanent desire to ignore or avoid God—is replaced by simple pity for human weakness.

Both the view that every sin is merely a mistake and, its obverse, a puritanical assumption that every mistake is a sin, are departures from the orthodox Christian approach. The appropriate response to a genuine mistake is to acknowledge it, apologise to any who may have been affected, and, where relevant, to make restitution. Sin, however, must give rise also to repentance. The Christian response is to admit the sin (even if it has no obvious consequences for others), confess it to God, claim the grace of God's forgiveness, and the strength to cease committing it.

Of course, everyone must acknowledge that not all "mistakes" are minor, on a par with "little white lies" or "getting one over" someone. Some are of a vastly different order, such as war, genocide, and the abuse and exploitation of certain social groups. One secularist response to acts of appalling enormity is to say that those who commit them are exceptions, outsiders to the human race: not merely inhumane, but in a real sense non-human. Less atrocious deeds can be explained as equally atypical: there is always one (but probably only one) "bad apple in a barrel". This contrasts with the Christian doctrine that each of us has the potential to sell his or her soul to the devil. As G.K. Chesterton expressed it, anyone can fall from any position at any time—and, in particular, I can fall from my position now.

Furthermore, exceptionalism does not take into account the fact that the evil consequences of misdeeds, from the most appalling to the relatively minor, are in the long run possible only through the complicity of others. This is expressed in a statement usually attributed to the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

Another approach to explaining away human sinfulness is to attribute the cause of immoral, anti-social, or deviant behaviour to contextual factors that lie outside any individual's control. The causes may be physical and/or social: poverty, lack of education, a dysfunctional family environment, and the like. A person who does something bad is a victim of circumstances; as Shakespeare's King Lear's put it, "more sinned against than sinning". In order to give greater weight to this argument, the notion of bad or undesirable behaviour itself is sometimes called into question. Immorality is in the eye of the beholder: it is the judgement of those who want to use it as a weapon against their opponents.

The main motivation for minimising and condoning sin is to avoid calling into question the optimistic belief in the perfectibility of humanity. Through the application of scientific knowledge and political will, it is widely assumed (and sometimes openly argued) that the world will become a fully tolerant and inclusive place, in which people will not pursue self-interest. The problem of what Christians call sin will be finally solved.

Experience suggests that such confidence is unfounded. It is secularism, and not Christianity, that dodges the issue. Media reports show that, even in highly favourable social and physical environments, criminality is as much a feature of modern life as it ever was (possibly more so), although the specific nature of the crimes may be different. (And the media, of course, have little to say about the innumerable instances of sinful but noncriminal behaviour and attitudes.) If spiritual values and principles are ignored or denied, there are no grounds for assuming that there is such a thing as a universal, underlying human consensus on what is right and wrong. Open intolerance of, or at least prejudice towards, certain groups in society may have become less overt in our society, but they are remarkably persistent, and even increasing, in others. An example is the so-called "cancel culture", in which anyone who does not openly endorse "woke" or "politically correct" values is subjected to vile abuse, and sometimes worse. Christians must call into question the presumption of inevitable progress and human perfectibility.

In our response to this blind secularist optimism, it is important to move on from some outmoded social perspectives that were generally adopted at a time in our own society's history. In days gone by, the Christian faith, if not always practised, was at least largely accepted as the norm for morality. It was common, even within living memory, to assume that any behaviour that was regarded as socially unacceptable was sin. This was particularly, but by no means exclusively, true of sexual behaviour. For example, a couple of generations ago it

was largely taken for granted that sexual intercourse outside marriage was adultery, and therefore morally wrong. It was pretty well universally agreed that adultery was a sin meriting punishment, although the severity of that punishment varied widely. Today, values among Christians have changed. It is no longer universally agreed that sex outside marriage, provided it is mutually agreed and is not violent, abusive, or exploitative, is inherently morally wrong. Similarly, some branches of the church taught until quite recently that the consumption of alcohol, or working on Sunday, was sinful.

Conclusion

This doctrine of original sin is, I believe, one of the fundamental ideas on which our faith rests. It is succinctly stated in a number of scriptural passages, e.g.:

> If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8—9)

It is also illustrated in many narratives and teaching passages in the Bible.

This doctrine is an important counter to all forms of explicit or assumed secularism. It is, however, not given much emphasis in many churches. This may well be a reaction to the over-zealous puritanism of earlier times, which seemed to take a ghoulish delight in emphasising human wickedness. However, our concept of sinfulness must be predicated on the fallibility of human nature itself, and not on temporary and changeable

social values. There is a place for divergent views of whether specific acts and attitudes are sins, but I believe that legitimate disagreement over such details must not call into question the doctrine of original sin itself.