A hand with a reddish-orange tint, pointing downwards with the index finger. The hand is positioned in the center-left of the frame. Overlaid on the image is large, black, sans-serif text. The words 'A LITTLE LOWER' are at the top, 'THAN THE' are in the middle, and 'ANGELS' is at the bottom. The text is arranged in a way that the hand appears to be pointing down towards the word 'ANGELS'. In the bottom left corner, there is a small orange circle containing the text 'What it means to' in white.

A LITTLE LOWER  
THAN THE  
ANGELS

What it  
means to

**What it means to be made in the image of God and why it matters**

**issue 11 – the doctrine of humanity**



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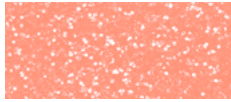


2

David Shaw

## **Introduction – Order out of Chaos**

*Our editor introduces the issue and articles*



6

Sarah Allen

## **“O Brave New World that has Such People in it!”**

*The story of humanity, as told by four recent books*



16

Stephen Williams

## **Something Old – Thus Spoke Nietzsche**

*A vision of humanity after “the death of God”*



32

David Shaw

## **Focusing the Image**

*The doctrine of humanity in Scripture*



46

John Wyatt

## **Ghost in the Machine**

*Technology and the future of humanity*

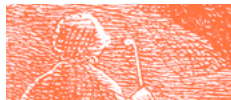


56

Mark Meynell

## **And Who is My Neighbour?**

*The image of God and the exercise of power*



74

Andrew Nicholls

## **Safe Spaces**

*An interview about abortion*



# Order out of Chaos

**It has occasionally been said  
that the early church had to  
fight for the truth of the Trinity,  
and that the Reformation was  
the great battle for a doctrine of  
salvation, whereas today's battle  
is for the nature of humanity.**

That is an exaggeration, of course, because every generation needs to teach and defend every major truth of the Christian faith (hence previous issues of *Primer* on the doctrine of God and of justification). And it's not as though doctrines are entirely self-contained. You cannot explain the doctrine of justification or the nature of humanity without a doctrine of God, for example (hence my increasing sense that the separate issues of *Primer* have all sorts of connecting threads between them).



Nevertheless, as Francis Schaeffer once said, “this is indeed no age to be soft on the Christian view of man” and he’s undoubtedly right. We are witnessing all kinds of confusion and conflict over the nature of human beings, male and female, created in the image of God. And so that is our theme for this issue.

To introduce this issue a little more I want to reflect on this cartoon from an 1882 issue of the *Punch* magazine.

*Back to Freedom and Dignity* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), 26. By “man,” of course, he means humanity.



It is a creation story of sorts. Out of the letters spelling *chaos* in the bottom left begins the familiar evolutionist story of progress, pictured here as an evolution from worm to ape to cave man to modern man.

Like so many contemporary stories it’s had God removed from the picture. Darwin and the man are there at the centre of this universe. Darwin’s pose looks a little like Adam’s from the Sistine Chapel. But no human hand reaches to God and no divine hand reaches back. At the top of the tree man simply tips his hat to man.

One of the major aims, therefore, of this issue of *Primer* is to understand how we have come to understand ourselves this way and what kind of vision for humanity emerges in the absence of God. To begin with, then, Sarah Allen surveys and reflects on several recent and bestselling books that are all asking those questions: “who are we?” and “what is our vision for humanity?”

Next, in our regular *Something Old* feature, Stephen Williams is our guide to a passage from Nietzsche. He famously announced that “God is dead,” and his vision for humanity in the wake of that death has been profoundly influential. Nietzsche’s name will be mentioned in other articles, but here is a chance to read him for ourselves and grasp something of his significance.

From there, we begin the work of putting God back in the picture. My article offers a biblical and theological reflection on humanity created in the image of God. Then we apply that theological vision to some of the major ethical issues of our day.

When you look at that *Punch* cartoon, it imagines the process has reached its climax, but there are many today who believe that technological advances will allow humanity to evolve and transcend its creaturely and earthy beginnings. John Wyatt’s article helps us reflect on those ideas and their consequences for us as individuals and as a culture, and then explores how a biblical vision of humanity might respond.

Notice too where this cartoon climaxes: privileged, aristocratic gentlemen. We’ve become sensitive in all kinds of ways to who is central and who is marginal when we think about the human race. And we’ve been painfully reminded how power can be abused by those at the top of their trees in damaging and destructive ways, both inside and outside the church. Central to addressing those issues is the recovery of the thought that every single person is created in the image of God, and that is the burden of the article by Mark Meynell.

Finally, it is striking that the cartoon has nothing to say about the weakest and most vulnerable, reflecting only the survival of the fittest. By contrast, Christians are called to image God in his concern for them. Of all the needs and opportunities around us, one of the most urgent and least championed is the protection of the unborn, and so we finish with some pastoral and practical advice on how to address that painful and sensitive issue.

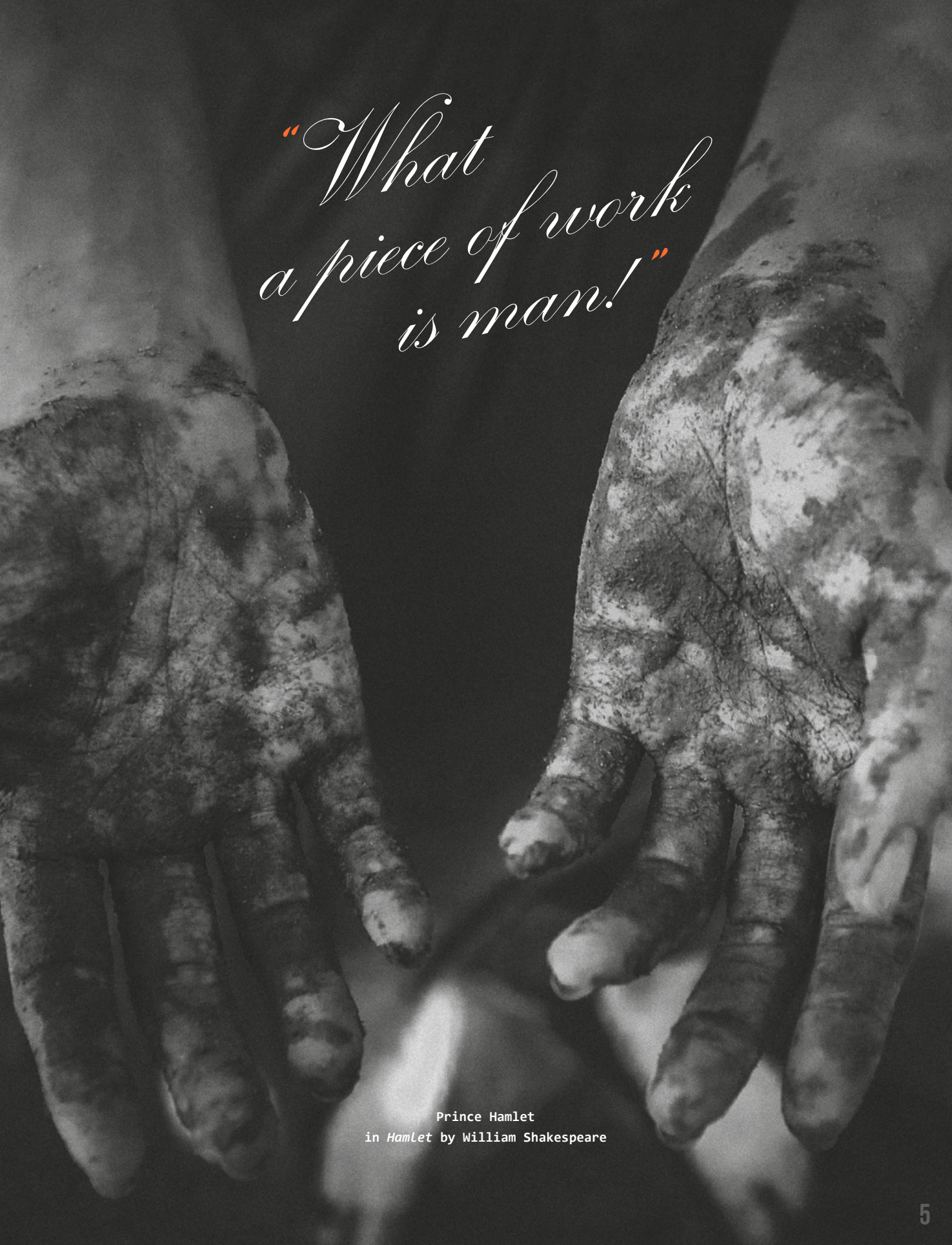
As ever, there are discussion questions at the end of each article, and we’ll be posting additional resources on *PrimerHQ.com*.



**DAVID SHAW** is the editor of *Primer*. He is Acting Vice-Principal and Lecturer in New Testament, Greek, and Biblical Theology at Oak Hill College, London, and an elder at Spicer Street Church, St Albans. He's married to Jo and they have four children.

 [@\\_david\\_shaw](https://twitter.com/_david_shaw)





*"What  
a piece of work  
is man!"*

Prince Hamlet  
in *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare






**"O BRAVE NEW WORLD THAT  
HAS SUCH PEOPLE IN IT!"**

**The story of humanity, as told by four recent books**





**SARAH ALLEN** teaches English to sixth-formers in Huddersfield and is a lecturer and Regional Coordinator for *Flourish*, London Seminary's training course for women in ministry. She has degrees in English Literature (Cambridge) and Theology (Union). Sarah is married to Lewis, and mum to five nearly grown-up children.

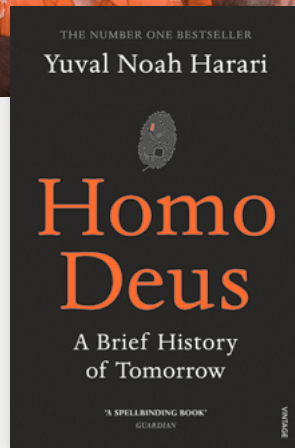
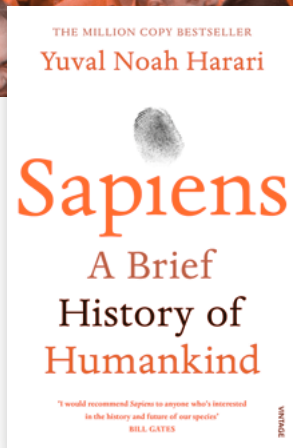
 @SAllenTweets



These days we are often told to suspect and reject grand narratives, especially those told by people of privilege. Clearly the public aren't listening too hard, though, because big books that promise to explain culture, written by white, male, (often) Oxbridge-educated academics, are selling pretty well at the moment. There is an appetite to understand how we've got to our strange cultural moment which cannot be satisfied by TED talks, Twitter, or the atheist apologetics of the early 2000s.

The four secular books I'm reviewing here each consider (to a greater or lesser extent) how religion has shaped our thought world, drawing into the popular domain ideas which have been discussed over the last thirty or more years by academics like Charles Taylor and Larry Siedentop. Each book has a different framework and comes to a different conclusion, but all agree that a distinctively Christian understanding of man has resulted in the liberal humanism which still dominates the West today, despite threats from technology and other worldviews.





## SAPIENS AND HOMO DEUS: THE FALL AND RISE OF MAN

*Sapiens*, by the atheist Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, and its sequel, *Homo Deus*, have become best sellers, despite their door-stop size (each just under 500 pages). Published in 2014 and 2016 respectively, both have been commended

by plenty of famous names, from Barack Obama to Radio DJ Chris Evans. These are popular-level books which make provocative and significant claims about both the past and the future.

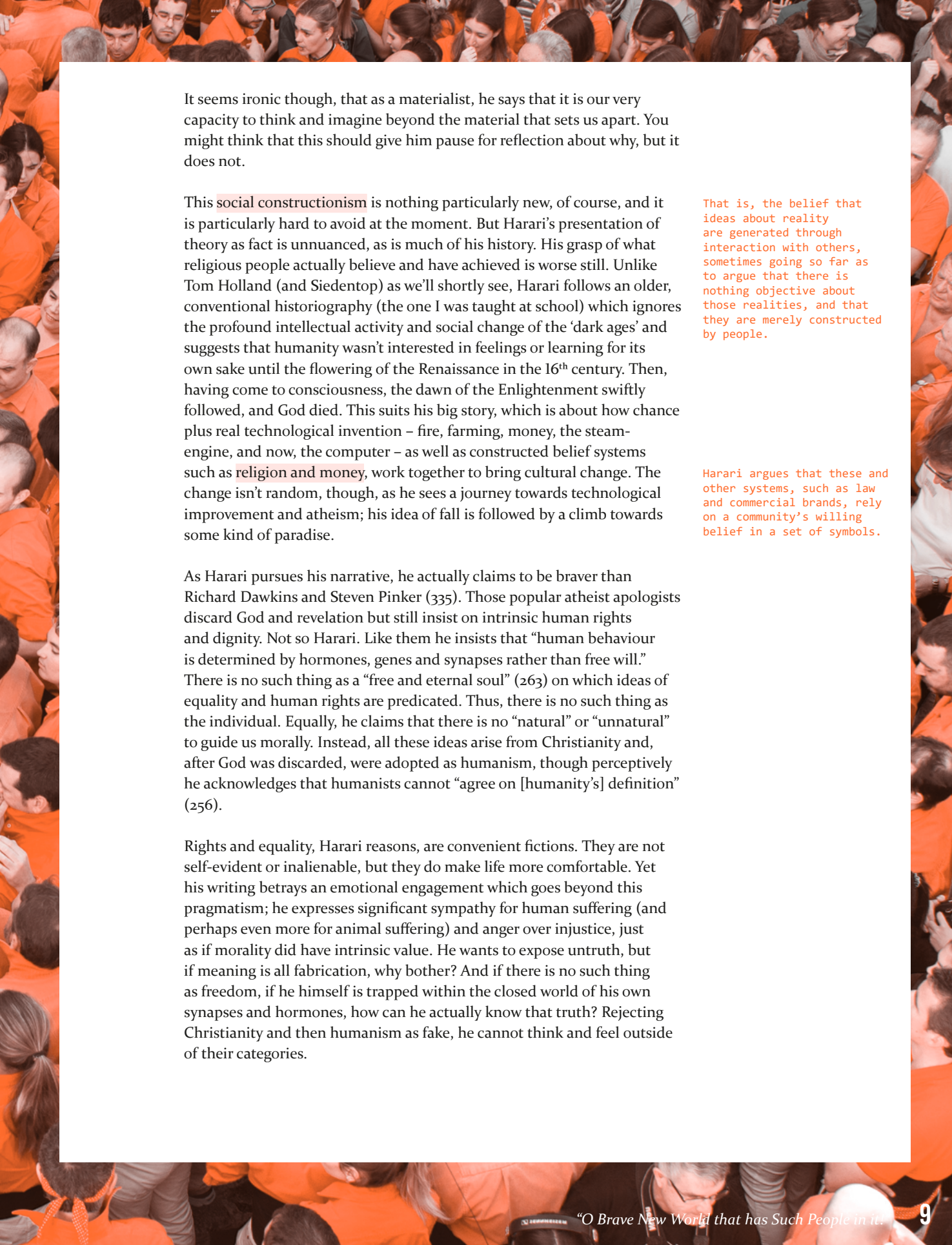
Subtitled 'A Brief History of Humankind', *Sapiens* takes the reader on a breakneck tour of human development, starting at pre-history and ending today. Harari's writing is full of ideas and engaging, detailed stories, but it is certainly more ideology than careful history. Harari has an aim: to dispel what he sees as myths about human development. The first of these is that humans have taken an upward trajectory from primitive to civilised. Rather, he sees it as a fall. The earliest humans, from his account, lived in a kind of **prelapsarian idyll**. They worked few hours, lived in harmony with nature, had a varied diet, suffered few illnesses, lived relatively long lives and were "the most knowledgeable and skilful people in history" (*Sapiens*, 55). Using a 20<sup>th</sup> century study of one tribe of hunter gatherers, he claims that their propensity to kill babies and despatch the elderly or sick was a minimal price to pay for the freedom to "change partners at will" as well as their "good social interactions and high-quality friendships" (59). His conclusion is that their **animism** is harmless; monotheism and agriculture are where trouble starts. It's not hard to see a romanticism here; a naïvely optimistic elevation of nature which sits slightly uncomfortably alongside his deconstruction of the gods of other value systems.

*Prelapsarian* refers to the time before the Fall.

*Animism* is the belief that places, objects, and creatures have spirits and are to be feared or worshipped.

What created this Eden was, in Harari's view, the cognitive revolution: a shift so seismic that it made us distinct from all other species. By "cognitive" he means the development of language to describe things that don't actually exist or can't be seen, which allowed the development of collective myths thus uniting large groups of people in common endeavour. He says that in this way "sapiens could invent socio-political codes that went far beyond the dictates of our DNA and the behaviour patterns of other human and animal species" (43). This capacity to communicate beyond the immediate, brought about, so Harari says, the convenient fictions of religion and money, law and nationhood or racial identity which create power structures and allow for social progress.





It seems ironic though, that as a materialist, he says that it is our very capacity to think and imagine beyond the material that sets us apart. You might think that this should give him pause for reflection about why, but it does not.

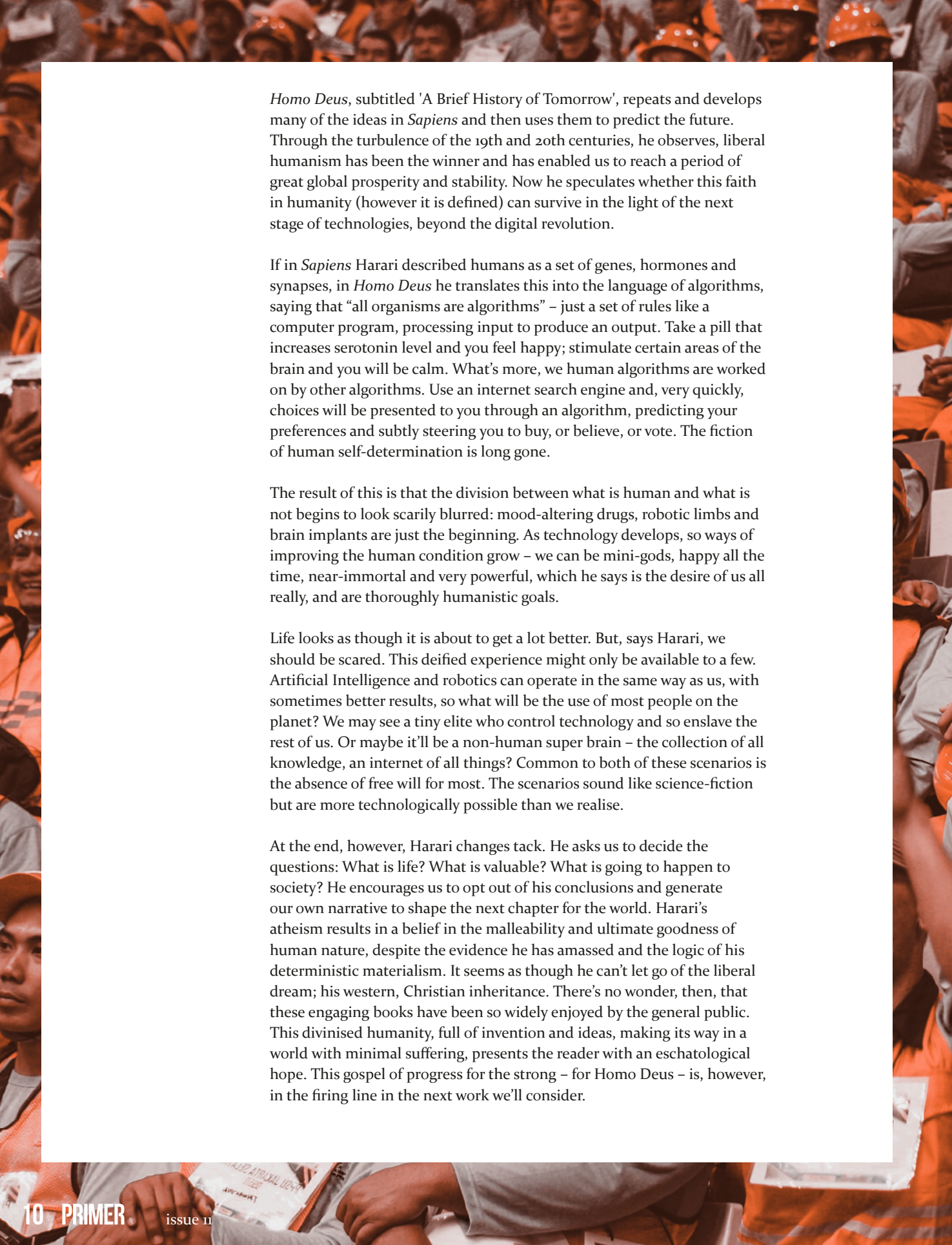
This **social constructionism** is nothing particularly new, of course, and it is particularly hard to avoid at the moment. But Harari's presentation of theory as fact is unnuanced, as is much of his history. His grasp of what religious people actually believe and have achieved is worse still. Unlike Tom Holland (and Siedentop) as we'll shortly see, Harari follows an older, conventional historiography (the one I was taught at school) which ignores the profound intellectual activity and social change of the 'dark ages' and suggests that humanity wasn't interested in feelings or learning for its own sake until the flowering of the Renaissance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Then, having come to consciousness, the dawn of the Enlightenment swiftly followed, and God died. This suits his big story, which is about how chance plus real technological invention – fire, farming, money, the steam-engine, and now, the computer – as well as constructed belief systems such as **religion and money**, work together to bring cultural change. The change isn't random, though, as he sees a journey towards technological improvement and atheism; his idea of fall is followed by a climb towards some kind of paradise.

That is, the belief that ideas about reality are generated through interaction with others, sometimes going so far as to argue that there is nothing objective about those realities, and that they are merely constructed by people.

Harari argues that these and other systems, such as law and commercial brands, rely on a community's willing belief in a set of symbols.

As Harari pursues his narrative, he actually claims to be braver than Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker (335). Those popular atheist apologists discard God and revelation but still insist on intrinsic human rights and dignity. Not so Harari. Like them he insists that "human behaviour is determined by hormones, genes and synapses rather than free will." There is no such thing as a "free and eternal soul" (263) on which ideas of equality and human rights are predicated. Thus, there is no such thing as the individual. Equally, he claims that there is no "natural" or "unnatural" to guide us morally. Instead, all these ideas arise from Christianity and, after God was discarded, were adopted as humanism, though perceptively he acknowledges that humanists cannot "agree on [humanity's] definition" (256).

Rights and equality, Harari reasons, are convenient fictions. They are not self-evident or inalienable, but they do make life more comfortable. Yet his writing betrays an emotional engagement which goes beyond this pragmatism; he expresses significant sympathy for human suffering (and perhaps even more for animal suffering) and anger over injustice, just as if morality did have intrinsic value. He wants to expose untruth, but if meaning is all fabrication, why bother? And if there is no such thing as freedom, if he himself is trapped within the closed world of his own synapses and hormones, how can he actually know that truth? Rejecting Christianity and then humanism as fake, he cannot think and feel outside of their categories.



*Homo Deus*, subtitled 'A Brief History of Tomorrow', repeats and develops many of the ideas in *Sapiens* and then uses them to predict the future. Through the turbulence of the 19th and 20th centuries, he observes, liberal humanism has been the winner and has enabled us to reach a period of great global prosperity and stability. Now he speculates whether this faith in humanity (however it is defined) can survive in the light of the next stage of technologies, beyond the digital revolution.

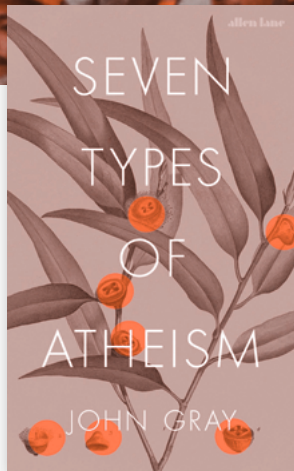
If in *Sapiens* Harari described humans as a set of genes, hormones and synapses, in *Homo Deus* he translates this into the language of algorithms, saying that “all organisms are algorithms” – just a set of rules like a computer program, processing input to produce an output. Take a pill that increases serotonin level and you feel happy; stimulate certain areas of the brain and you will be calm. What’s more, we human algorithms are worked on by other algorithms. Use an internet search engine and, very quickly, choices will be presented to you through an algorithm, predicting your preferences and subtly steering you to buy, or believe, or vote. The fiction of human self-determination is long gone.

The result of this is that the division between what is human and what is not begins to look scarily blurred: mood-altering drugs, robotic limbs and brain implants are just the beginning. As technology develops, so ways of improving the human condition grow – we can be mini-gods, happy all the time, near-immortal and very powerful, which he says is the desire of us all really, and are thoroughly humanistic goals.

Life looks as though it is about to get a lot better. But, says Harari, we should be scared. This deified experience might only be available to a few. Artificial Intelligence and robotics can operate in the same way as us, with sometimes better results, so what will be the use of most people on the planet? We may see a tiny elite who control technology and so enslave the rest of us. Or maybe it’ll be a non-human super brain – the collection of all knowledge, an internet of all things? Common to both of these scenarios is the absence of free will for most. The scenarios sound like science-fiction but are more technologically possible than we realise.

At the end, however, Harari changes tack. He asks us to decide the questions: What is life? What is valuable? What is going to happen to society? He encourages us to opt out of his conclusions and generate our own narrative to shape the next chapter for the world. Harari’s atheism results in a belief in the malleability and ultimate goodness of human nature, despite the evidence he has amassed and the logic of his deterministic materialism. It seems as though he can’t let go of the liberal dream; his western, Christian inheritance. There’s no wonder, then, that these engaging books have been so widely enjoyed by the general public. This divinised humanity, full of invention and ideas, making its way in a world with minimal suffering, presents the reader with an eschatological hope. This gospel of progress for the strong – for *Homo Deus* – is, however, in the firing line in the next work we’ll consider.






## ***SEVEN TYPES OF ATHEISM: LOSING OURSELVES IN SURROGATE RELIGIONS***

John Gray's book is rather different from *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. It doesn't claim to be history, though he does narrate some of the history of post-enlightenment philosophy, albeit non-chronologically.

Its title, *Seven Types of Atheism*, sets out his stall and is a riff on William Empson's book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (a set text for me when I set out on my English Literature degree nearly thirty years ago). The reference to Empson is significant as he is one of the figures to be explored in later chapters, and just as Empson argued in the 1950s that ambiguity could function in different ways to different effect, so this is what Gray contends about atheism. This isn't an observer's guide, however, but a countdown, beginning with his least favoured form of unbelief and ending with what he proposes is the most satisfying stance. Throughout, Gray reminds us that all types of atheism are responses to religion and, significantly, most stem from creed-based Christianity. Indeed, once formalised, "atheistic movements have been vehicles for surrogate religions" (22), holding similar dangers and flaws. It seems that to be human is to wrestle with gods.

Gray begins with, and neatly dispatches, Dawkins-style new atheism. This is, he convincingly contends, just a "tedious re-run of a Victorian squabble between science and religion" (9) which mistakes the purpose of science as the provision of meaning (incidentally, Gray suggests that if atheist evangelists want to destroy Christianity they should focus on history, not science). Like Harari, he states clearly that the liberal values of human dignity and equal worth espoused by the new atheists are a Christian legacy and not a natural law.

Following the same reasoning, Gray dismisses secular humanism, the atheistic religions of science and politics, and atheism inspired by hatred for God. He covers a hugely diverse range of thinkers (including amongst others, Bertrand Russell, Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill, Ayn Rand, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and the Marquis de Sade) with flair and some dry humour. All of these different forms of unbelief are parasites, feeding off the body of Christianity, but unable to define clearly what it is to be human. Gray summarises, "in every case, the species whose progress they believed they were advancing was a phantom of their imagination" (51). He argues in detail to show that the conception of humanity as a unified



The "Overhuman" is Nietzsche's vision for humanity's future. See Stephen Williams' article in this issue.

group with shared values and rights, and the idea of historical progress are uniquely Christian. Even Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, in Gray's reckoning, is not far from a Christ-figure. Driving so many of these permutations of atheism is anger at the cruelty of the Christian God, but of course, that repulsion at cruelty is itself a Christian response; it does not solve the problem of evil, indeed, so many of them have actually generated their own terrible evils. For Gray, these forms of certainty and idealism can be very dangerous.

In the last two chapters Gray describes atheisms which appeal to him more, those of thinkers like Spinoza, Schopenhauer, George Santayana and the novelist Joseph Conrad. What these men have in common is a respect for religion, rather than a hatred of it, but also a resistance to the ideas of progress and order, or of deified humanity. Gray concludes that their type of atheism is close to a theology which affirms an ineffable god: a god who is present but unknowable and uninvolved, or so omnipresent as to be indistinct from reality. Tacitly then, he shows that humanity is naturally religious, and that we cannot think without implying a god. We seem to be wired for unified and coherent systems of thought, rather than complexity and irresolution. To live, as Gray chooses, "without belief or unbelief" (157) is perhaps profoundly unnatural and remains clearly a faith position. What is more, though Gray is a generous, gentle guide, his stance seems a deliberately distanced, unattractively dispassionate position to take. Could we go so far as to conclude that this emphasis on the unknown (which Gray himself likens to Buddhism or Eastern Orthodox negative theology) results in the erasure of the self? Does excluding the knowledge of God result in humanity becoming unknowable? Perhaps when images of God lose sight of the one they image, they lose themselves also. Ineffability might lead to mystery and awe, but very little comfort.

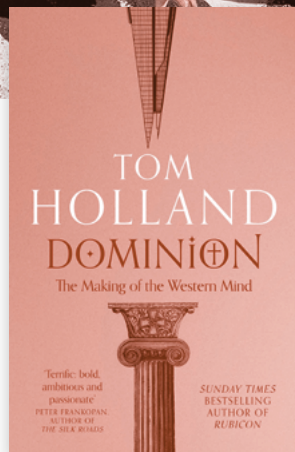
i.e. the idea that we can only speak of God according to what he is not, sometimes to the point of denying he is really knowable.

PERHAPS WHEN IMAGES OF GOD

LOSE SIGHT OF THE ONE THEY IMAGE,

THEY LOSE THEMSELVES ALSO.





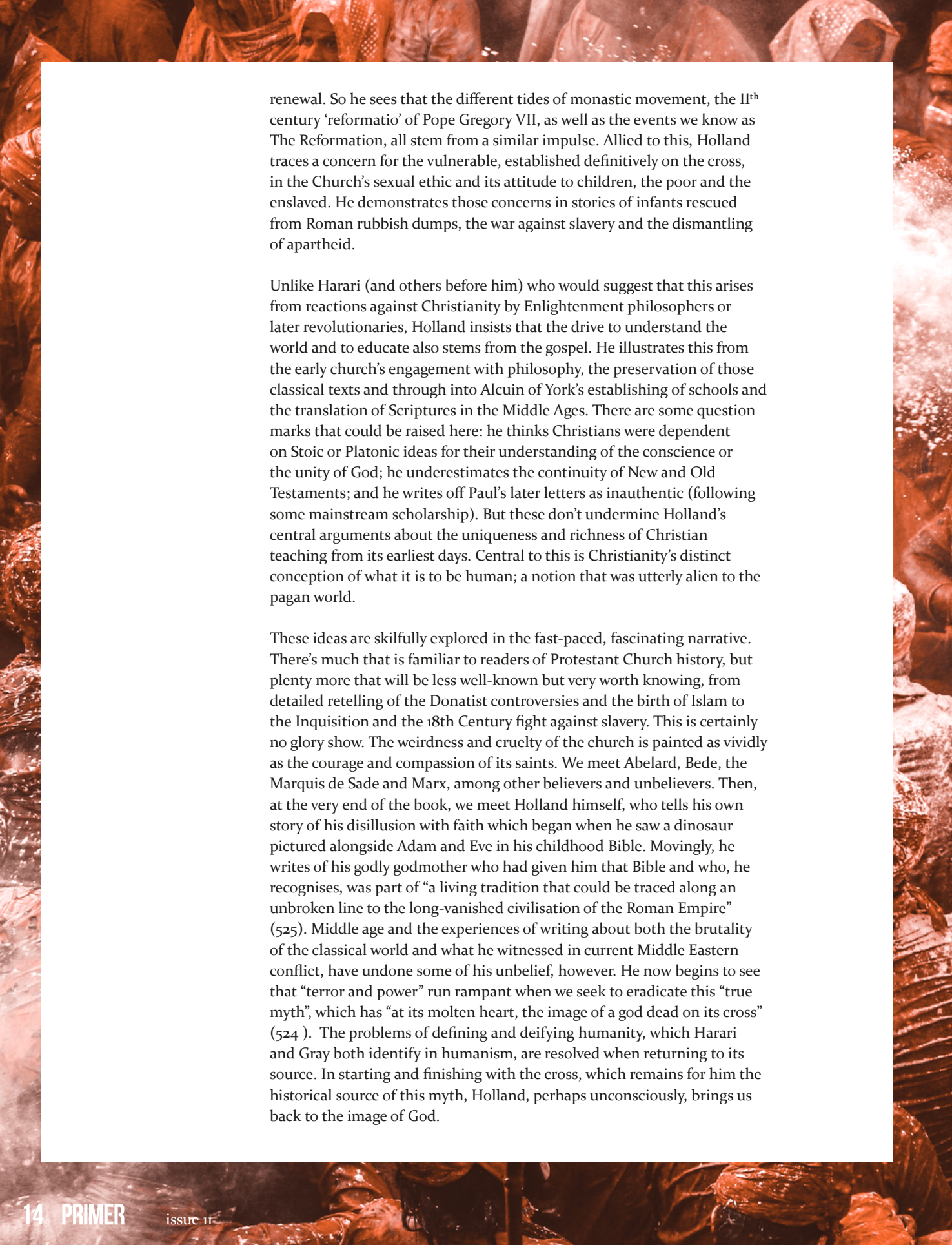
## **DOMINION: REFORMING HUMANITY AT THE CROSS**

The last of these four books is the longest and the most optimistic. Like *Sapiens*, Tom Holland's *Dominion* is a book about how stories and ideas lead and shape change in society. In a similar way to both Gray and Harari, Holland recognises that the West's insistence on human rights is a legacy of Christianity. Like Harari, Holland writes history vividly, and like Gray he shows an impressive command of complex sources. There are notable differences, however. Reviews by other historians, whether they agree with his conclusions or not, concur that Holland's detail is more accurate than Harari's. *Dominion* also reflects the greater historical continuity that Holland sees, as well as his narrower focus. He aims not to write a 'Brief History' but to answer the question: "how was it that a cult inspired by the execution of an obscure criminal in a long-vanished empire came to exercise such a transformative and enduring influence on the world?" (xxiv).

Compare these reviews, for example: [historyforatheists.com/2020/01/tom-holland-dominion/](https://historyforatheists.com/2020/01/tom-holland-dominion/) and [scholar.harvard.edu/files/shapin/files/Lrb\\_harari.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/shapin/files/Lrb_harari.pdf)

Holland starts with the cross rather than any metaphysical statement or summary. He rightly locates Christianity first in history, in the words of Christ, and in the conviction that "the last shall be first, and the first last" (xxi), capturing its radical nature as "sinister and aberrant" to the first century Romans (xxiii). More than Harari, who claims that we are living in a humanist age – that God is dead – but identifies the Christian legacy in our concepts of equality and rights, Holland says today's Western culture is "utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions" (xxv, italics mine). This means something different for him than Gray's dangerous "God surrogates." Here, they are benefits. At the end of his book, Holland traces this in both the calls from LGBTQ+ groups for society's transformation and repentance and also in the exponential growth of the evangelical Church in Africa and Asia. That's not to say that he confuses the two, but that he sees the impact of centuries of Christian teaching about the value of the outcast, the need for justice and the desire to change the world, played out in both the church and the secular world. And he's right, they are "like dust particles... breathed in equally by everyone" (517).

Even that division between the world and the Church is a uniquely Christian framework, Holland rightly argues. Along with this, he identifies reformation to be at the heart of the Church's nature, explaining in part its tragic propensity to divide, because an entity built on confession of sin and the call to holiness will inevitably be involved in sometimes violent



renewal. So he sees that the different tides of monastic movement, the 11<sup>th</sup> century 'reformatio' of Pope Gregory VII, as well as the events we know as The Reformation, all stem from a similar impulse. Allied to this, Holland traces a concern for the vulnerable, established definitively on the cross, in the Church's sexual ethic and its attitude to children, the poor and the enslaved. He demonstrates those concerns in stories of infants rescued from Roman rubbish dumps, the war against slavery and the dismantling of apartheid.

Unlike Harari (and others before him) who would suggest that this arises from reactions against Christianity by Enlightenment philosophers or later revolutionaries, Holland insists that the drive to understand the world and to educate also stems from the gospel. He illustrates this from the early church's engagement with philosophy, the preservation of those classical texts and through into Alcuin of York's establishing of schools and the translation of Scriptures in the Middle Ages. There are some question marks that could be raised here: he thinks Christians were dependent on Stoic or Platonic ideas for their understanding of the conscience or the unity of God; he underestimates the continuity of New and Old Testaments; and he writes off Paul's later letters as inauthentic (following some mainstream scholarship). But these don't undermine Holland's central arguments about the uniqueness and richness of Christian teaching from its earliest days. Central to this is Christianity's distinct conception of what it is to be human; a notion that was utterly alien to the pagan world.

These ideas are skilfully explored in the fast-paced, fascinating narrative. There's much that is familiar to readers of Protestant Church history, but plenty more that will be less well-known but very worth knowing, from detailed retelling of the Donatist controversies and the birth of Islam to the Inquisition and the 18<sup>th</sup> Century fight against slavery. This is certainly no glory show. The weirdness and cruelty of the church is painted as vividly as the courage and compassion of its saints. We meet Abelard, Bede, the Marquis de Sade and Marx, among other believers and unbelievers. Then, at the very end of the book, we meet Holland himself, who tells his own story of his disillusion with faith which began when he saw a dinosaur pictured alongside Adam and Eve in his childhood Bible. Movingly, he writes of his godly godmother who had given him that Bible and who, he recognises, was part of "a living tradition that could be traced along an unbroken line to the long-vanished civilisation of the Roman Empire" (525). Middle age and the experiences of writing about both the brutality of the classical world and what he witnessed in current Middle Eastern conflict, have undone some of his unbelief, however. He now begins to see that "terror and power" run rampant when we seek to eradicate this "true myth", which has "at its molten heart, the image of a god dead on its cross" (524). The problems of defining and deifying humanity, which Harari and Gray both identify in humanism, are resolved when returning to its source. In starting and finishing with the cross, which remains for him the historical source of this myth, Holland, perhaps unconsciously, brings us back to the image of God.



At the heart of *Dominion*, then, is a recognition that Christian belief entails a unique anthropology of difference, dignity, equality and responsibility. That is, as responsible and moral beings, we are individuals. Our value is not determined by class or race, but by creation, and so each individual has worth, and is responsible to and, importantly, *for* others – we are more than individuals. Though Holland does not spell this out, he also certainly implies a mystery of sin and redemption in his description of the high dreams, gross failures and transformation of many.

## WHERE NEXT?

It is perhaps tempting for the evangelical to feel a little triumphant at these four books, and to rub our hands at their apologetic potential. Together they show that our secularised west – so blighted now by multiple graceless conflicts between freedom and responsibility, individual and shared identities, progress and corruption – is the product of Christian truth. But beyond that, our culture reveals our nature as fallen images of God. History, as Marilynne Robinson says, “is the great unfinished portrait of old Adam.” We need to be careful though, and to think hard, asking how we can engage with the challenges of this rapidly changing and conflicted culture with grace. Can we start with the incarnation, the second and greater Adam, the humble God-man, who was broken and glorified? He is surely the place where these conflicts find resolution.

Marilynne Robinson, ‘Son of Adam, Son of God’ in *The Givenness of Things* (London: Virago, 2015), 256. This essay is a wonderful philosophical meditation on Psalm 8 and the incarnation.

## Questions for further thought and discussion

1. To what extent do you think Western secular culture is “utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions” (Tom Holland)?
2. How might that claim be helpful or unhelpful in our evangelism? What does Gray’s concept of “God surrogates” add or change?
3. “Christian belief entails a unique anthropology of difference, dignity, equality and responsibility.” Why are each of those important and crucial to hold together with the others?



# THUS SPOKE Nietzsche

A VISION OF  
HUMANITY AFTER  
"THE DEATH OF  
GOD"





## STEPHEN WILLIAMS

was Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological College, Belfast, until his retirement in 2017. He is currently Honorary Professor of Theology at Queen's University, Belfast.

**“I have with this book  
[*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*]  
given mankind the greatest  
gift that has ever been given  
it. With a voice that speaks  
across millennia, it is not  
only the most exalted book  
that exists... it is also the  
*profoundest*, born out of  
the innermost abundance  
of truth, an inexhaustible  
well into which no bucket  
descends without coming  
up filled with gold and  
goodness.”**

These words were written in a book called: *Ecce Homo*, shortly before Nietzsche's mental collapse in January, 1889, from which he never recovered. They may be read as evidence of imbalance – a dramatically narcissistic self-assessment. Be that as it may, the influence of Nietzsche's authorship has been vast and permeated many social layers. People will never agree on either the quality of Nietzsche's work or its interpretation, but the influence is beyond dispute. Some time ago, I took part in a debate with atheists at a university on behalf of the Christian Union during its mission week. Of the five or so student speakers who rose to oppose me, four quoted Nietzsche to the effect that Christianity demeaned humans and was socially oppressive. They may not have known their Nietzsche very well, but his formulations captured their opposition to Christianity.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is Nietzsche's extended anti-Christian manifesto. Both its form and its substance indicate that it should be read as the Scripture of the 'Antichrist', as the author called himself, although the German can also be translated: 'The anti-Christian'. It is a key text for understanding Nietzsche's view of humanity for two reasons. Firstly, it contains teaching about the human condition, as Nietzsche understood it, and the extract below outlines some of its salient features. Secondly, it does so in a distinctive way, as far as Nietzsche's authorship is concerned, in the form of a dramatic narrative which is designed to engage our imagination and our sensitivities so that we feel, and not only believe, Nietzsche's truth about humankind. Was he successful? Nietzsche's readers have come up with every point on the scale from 0 to 10 in their answers.



Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*Ecce Homo*, trans. R. J.  
Hollingdale (London:  
Penguin, 1992), 97-98.

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in 1844 and began the move away from his childhood Lutheran faith sometime during his teens. He opened his campaign against Christianity in a work called *Human, All Too Human*, whose first part appeared in 1878. This was the first in a trilogy of 'free-spirited' works and was followed by *Daybreak* and *The Gay Science*. These were succeeded by *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, whose first and second parts appeared in 1883. (The book eventually comprised four parts). 'Zarathustra' is normally known as 'Zoroaster' in English, the founder of the religion of Zoroastrianism, who apparently lived no later than the sixth century BC and possibly lived several centuries, if not millennia, before then. According to Nietzsche, Zarathustra "was the first to see in the struggle between good and evil the actual wheel in the working of things... Zarathustra created this most fateful of errors, morality..." Nietzsche wanted to undo millennia of thinking about good and evil. So the figure who walks through the pages of his work bears the name 'Zarathustra' but undoes the work of the original Zarathustra and preaches, instead, the individual creation of new values.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* assumes that God is dead; that is, that belief in God has been definitively discredited. What will replace it? Nietzsche interprets the situation as follows. Belief in God has been intellectually and culturally central in Europe for a long time. There are plenty of atheists around who have no idea of how momentous an event the death of God is. The worst of it is that the 'shadow' of God is still abroad. What is the shadow? Many phenomena coalesce to form it, but none is more important than Christian morality. For Nietzsche, once belief in God has been shredded, it is pathetic to hang onto Christian morality. You cannot consistently do that. It is distasteful even to try. Inconsistent because there is no objective foundation at all for morality if there is no God. Distasteful because Christian morality is thoroughly dehumanising. "What decides against Christianity now is our taste, not our reasons."

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* consists of a number of discourses within a narrative. Zarathustra the lonely, the man of "azure solitude," sallies forth from his lakeside retreat to enter the teeming world of humans. Will he make disciples? Will they grasp his message? If he will and if they do, will

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1974), 186.



they sustain their grip on his teaching? By the end of the work the questions are answered in the negative. One day, perhaps, Zarathustra's true children will be gathered in. His time has not yet come. This, more or less, is Nietzsche's judgment on his contemporaries.

Those who are familiar with the scholarship on Nietzsche will be tempted to hesitate before saying anything dogmatic about his thought without nervously glancing round at other interpreters. However, it would be wrong to assume that everything we might say about Nietzsche's thought is contentious. If we turn to the chapter 'On Old and New Tablets', the longest and what Nietzsche would later call the 'decisive' chapter in the book, much in his message comes through loud and clear. It will be useful to pause with it for a moment before moving onto our extract. It elucidates the moral implications of Nietzsche's view of humankind.

"When I came to human beings," Zarathustra says in that chapter, "I found them sitting on an old conceit: all of them believed they had long known what good and evil were for the human being." Zarathustra will disabuse them of that knowledge:

"The human is something that must be overcome." In other words, the human is a bridge and not a goal. For Nietzsche, there is a massive obstacle to human self-overcoming: old law-tables, conventional beliefs that moral truth is handed to us on the plate of objectivity in the manner of the tablets from Mount Sinai. And so the message is "Shatter them!" There is no God, so reach out for "a new nobility." Will! Will new values. The old are impositions on life. Why put up with ugly, weary, needless burdens? "With whom does the greatest danger for all human future lie? Is it not with the good and the righteous? Shatter, shatter for me the good and the righteous!" And believe it: "blessedness must it seem to you to press your hand upon millennia as upon wax."

That brief synopsis also illustrates the poetical and lyrical style of the whole work. Thus, rather than disrupting the flow by annotating individual sentences, I have commented on each of its five sections at the end of those sections. In this introduction, I have given some background to what Nietzsche tells us about humanity. Now we shall hear his voice.

THE FOLLOWING TRANSLATION, FROM THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS EDITION, IS USED BY THE KIND PERMISSION OF THE TRANSLATOR, GRAHAM PARKES.



Hence Nietzsche's famous figure of the *Übermensch*, the 'Overhuman' (which has sometimes rather unfortunately been rendered: 'Superman').

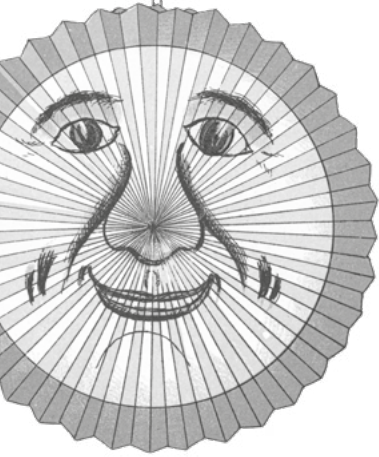
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). 176.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 186.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 187.

Nietzsche uses the word 'prologue' to describe both Zarathustra's discourse in our extract and the larger whole, the 'Prologue' to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, of which our extract is a part. To avoid confusion, I use the word 'Prologue' below to refer to the whole Prologue and 'preface' to refer to the extracted part of it.

# ONE



When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he abandoned his home and the lake of his home and went into the mountains. Here he enjoyed his spirit and his solitude and for ten years did not tire of them. At last, however, there was a change in his heart – and so one morning with the dawn of morning he rose, stepped out before the sun, and spoke to it thus:

‘Greetings, Great Star! What would your happiness be, were it not for those whom you illumine!

‘For ten years you have come up here to my cave: you would have grown weary of your light and of this course, without me, my eagle, and my serpent.

‘But we were waiting for you every morning, took from you your overflow and also blessed you for it.

‘Behold! I am overburdened with my wisdom: like the bee that has gathered too much honey, I need hands outstretched to receive it.

‘I should like to bestow and distribute, until the wise among human beings once again become glad of their folly and the poor once again of their riches.

‘For that I must descend into the depths: just as you do in the evening when you go down behind the sea and still bring light to the underworld, you overrich star!

‘I must, like you, *go under*, as human beings call it, to whom I would go down.

‘So bless me then, you tranquil eye, who can look without envy even upon all-too-great happiness!

‘Bless the cup that wants to overflow, that the water may flow from it golden and carry everywhere the reflection of your delight!

‘Behold! This cup wants to become empty again, and Zarathustra wants to become human again.’

— Thus began Zarathustra’s going-under.

Readers of the opening words of the ‘Prologue’ will remember Jesus at thirty, living near a lake and ascending a mountain. Nietzsche intended the memory. Biblical resonances are strong throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Where Jesus embarked on his public ministry at the age of thirty, Zarathustra does so at the age of forty, regarded by the ancient Greeks as the peak of human life, as Nietzsche well knew. Jesus, says Zarathustra in a later chapter,



died too young; he was spiritually immature and would have retracted his teaching had he lived longer ('On Free Death'). Plato's language also powders *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and reference to the sun in this section recalls its use as a symbol of intellectual enlightenment in Plato's *Republic*. Nietzsche regarded Christianity as "Platonism for the people," a popular version of the faulty belief that there exists a transcendent, non-worldly, reality.

From the  
Preface to  
his work  
*Beyond Good  
and Evil*.

Throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra has to fight off the temptation to disgust, despair or to have compassion on humans. On the one hand, he cannot keep his wisdom to himself. His cup overflows. On the other hand, his experience of humans, as it unfolds throughout the volume, reveals that his temporary physical solitude is the counterpart of a continuous spiritual solitude. His true and constant companions are the eagle and the serpent. One soars high, the other slides low; one is indomitable, the other, cunning. Zarathustra understands heights and depths, power and craftiness. That he has such creatures as companions underscores his separation from the mass of humanity. But he will give humans a chance to hear his teaching.

Zarathustra climbed down the mountain alone and no one encountered him. But when he came into the forest, there suddenly stood before him an old man who had left his holy hut in order to search in the forest for roots. And thus spoke the old man to Zarathustra:



'No stranger to me is this wanderer: many years ago he passed by here before. Zarathustra he was called; but now he has transformed himself.

'Then you were carrying your ashes to the mountains: would you today carry your fire into the valleys? Do you not fear the arsonist's punishment?

'Yes, I recognize Zarathustra. Clear is his eye, and around his mouth no trace of disgust. Does he not walk like a dancer?

'Zarathustra is transformed, Zarathustra has become a child, Zarathustra is an awakened one: what do you want now among sleepers?

'You lived in your solitude as if in the sea, and the sea bore you up. Alas, you want to climb onto land? Alas, you want to drag your body yourself again?'

Zarathustra answered: 'I love human beings.'

'But why', said the holy man, 'did I go into the forest and the desert? Was it not because I loved human beings all too much?

'Now I love God: human beings I love not. The human being is for me too incomplete an affair. Love of human beings would be the death of me.'



Zarathustra answered: 'What did I say of love! I bring human beings a present.'

'Give them nothing,' said the holy man. 'Rather take something from them and carry it for them: that will do them the greatest good – as long as it does you good!

'And if you would give to them, then give them nothing more than alms, and let them beg even for that!'

'No,' answered Zarathustra, 'I give no alms. For that I am not poor enough.'

The holy man laughed at Zarathustra and spoke to him thus: 'Then see to it that they accept your treasures! They are suspicious of solitaires, and do not believe that we come in order to bestow.

'Too lonely for them is the sound of our footsteps in the lanes. And when in their beds at night they hear a man going by long before the sun has risen, they surely ask themselves: Where is that thief going?

'Do not go to human beings but stay in the forest! Go rather even to the beasts! Why would you not be, like me – a bear among the bears, a bird among the birds?'

'And what does the holy man do in the forest?' asked Zarathustra.

The holy man answered: 'I make up songs and sing them, and as I make up songs, I laugh and weep and growl: thus do I praise God.

'With singing, weeping, laughing, and growling I praise the God who is my God. But what do you bring us as a present?'

When Zarathustra heard these words he saluted the holy man and said: 'What could I have to give to you! But let me go quickly, that I might take nothing from you!' – And thus they parted from each other, the old man and the younger, laughing, just like two boys laughing.

But when Zarathustra was alone again, he spoke thus to his heart: 'Could this be possible! This old holy man in his forest has heard nothing of this yet, that *God is dead!*'—



"God is dead." That is the presupposition of Zarathustra's teaching. Zarathustra's task is to teach what must replace God. A total subversion of traditional religious and moral attitudes is required. The religious hermit seeks God because humans do not satisfy. For Zarathustra, as there is no God, only humans are left. Where a despairing religion drives its devotees to abandon humans and go to the forest, post-religious Zarathustra sallies forth in an attempt to rescue humans.



The hermit sees but does not understand Zarathustra and wishes him to relieve humans of their burdens. He knows that Zarathustra has become a child – newly awakened and enlightened. This symbolises new life after the death of God. ‘Awakening’ has connotations of Buddhist enlightenment and there is a literature which discusses positive intellectual connections between Nietzsche and Buddhism. For Nietzsche, humans are ignorant and unenlightened. Herd-like, in a world of decay, they do not understand the wisdom that comes from solitude.

At one stage, Nietzsche collaborated with Wagner, whose grand aim was to renew Europe culturally and spiritually via the arts. Breaking with Wagner was painful for Nietzsche but he retained the composer’s desire for a European renaissance. Nietzsche judged it obvious that theistic belief has been intellectually discredited and entered into the inheritance of the **materialist** wing of the French Enlightenment. His mission is to ally a new philosophy of life to the truth of atheistic materialism. If the non-existence of God is a fundamental presupposition of Nietzsche’s thought, a thoroughly materialist understanding of humanity is another.

i.e. the belief that the only thing that exists is matter.

When Zarathustra came to the nearest town, which lay on the edge of the forest, he found there a crowd of people gathered in the market-square, for it had been announced that a rope-dancer would be appearing. And Zarathustra spoke to the people thus:

## T H R E E

*‘I teach to you the Overhuman. The human is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome it?’*

*‘All beings so far have created something beyond themselves: and you want to be the ebb of this great tide, and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome the human?’*

*‘What is the ape for the human being? A laughing-stock or a painful cause for shame. And the human shall be just that for the Overhuman: a laughing-stock or a painful cause for shame.’*

*‘You have made your way from worm to human, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now the human being is still more of an ape than any ape is.’*

*‘Whoever is the wisest among you is still no more than a discord and hybrid between plant and spectre. But do I bid you become spectres or plants?’*

*‘Behold, I teach to you the Overhuman!’*





‘The Overhuman is the sense of the earth. May your will say: *Let the Overhuman be the sense of the earth!*

‘I beseech you, my brothers, *stay true to the earth* and do not believe those who talk of over-earthly hopes! They are poison-mixers, whether they know it or not.

‘They are despisers of life, moribund and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them pass on!

‘Once sacrilege against God was the greatest sacrilege, but God died, and thereby the sacrilegious died too. Sacrilege against the earth is now the most terrible thing, and to revere the entrails of the unfathomable more than a sense of the earth!

‘Once the soul looked despidngly upon the body, and at that time this despising was the highest thing: she wanted the body to be lean, ghastly, and starved. Thus she thought to slip away from the body and the earth.

‘Oh this soul was herself still lean, ghastly, and starved: and cruelty was the lust of this soul!

‘But you too, my brothers, tell me: what does your body proclaim about your soul? Is your soul not poverty and filth and wretched contentment?

‘Verily, a polluted stream is the human. One must be a veritable sea to absorb such a polluted stream without becoming unclean.

‘Behold, I teach to you the Overhuman: it is this sea, in this can your great despising submerge itself.

‘What is the greatest you could experience? It is the hour of the great despising. The hour in which even your happiness disgusts you and likewise your reason and your virtue.

‘The hour when you say: “What good is my happiness! It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment. But my happiness should justify existence itself!”

‘The hour when you say: “What good is my reason! Does it crave knowing as the lion craves its food? It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment.”

‘The hour when you say: “What good is my virtue! It has yet to set me raging. How tired I am of my good and my evil! All that is poverty and filth and wretched contentment!”

‘The hour when you say: “What good is my righteousness! I do not see that I am a blaze of hot coals. But one who is righteous is a blaze of hot coals!”



‘The hour when you say: “What good is my pitying! Is not pity the Cross upon which he who loves humankind is nailed? But my pitying is no crucifixion.”

‘Have you ever spoken thus? Have you ever cried thus? Ah, that I might already have heard you cry thus!

‘Not your sin – your frugality rails against Heaven, the very avarice in your sin rails against Heaven!

‘Where then is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the madness with which you must be inoculated?

‘Behold, I teach to you the Overhuman: it is this lightning, it is this madness!’—

When Zarathustra had spoken thus, someone from among the people shouted: ‘We’ve heard enough about the rope-dancer: now let us see him too!’ And all the people laughed at Zarathustra. But the rope-dancer, thinking the words concerned him, began his performance.

Immediately after musing on the death of God, Zarathustra opens up his teaching: “*I teach you the Übermensch*”, the new type of man. (Arguably, Nietzsche’s ‘man’ is a non-inclusive masculine.) If man is the substitute for God, earth is also the substitute for heaven. We know what earth is, but what exactly is ‘man’? Nietzsche subscribed to an evolutionary world-view. However, he thought that Darwin was mistaken in viewing self-preservation as the essence of the biological organism. Rather, its essence is to maximize its power. As *homo sapiens* evolved from the lower animals, so the ‘Overhuman’ must succeed contemporary humankind not by collective biological evolution but by strong-willed individual decision. The ‘Overhuman’ is as distant from ordinary humans as they are from the ape. There is debate about the influence of Nietzsche on transhumanism, the philosophy which advances the radical technical enhancement of humankind. But Nietzsche identifies resolute will, not artificial technology, as the instrument of human betterment.

Radical re-valuation, a critique of received values, is imperative. Nietzsche castigated Christianity as anti-natural. It suppresses natural instinct and glorifies self-denial and self-abasement. It despises tangible earth in its quest for an invisible heaven. To pity humans unto death on a cross is thoroughly demeaning of humanity. Nietzsche refers to the cross as ‘the worst of all trees’ in the chapter, ‘Of Old and New Tablets’, and later expresses his revulsion towards the God who died on the cross for shaming us by his pity. At the end of book 3 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks eight questions and the answers to the last three all feature shame. “*Whom do you call bad?* – He who always wants to put people to shame. *What is most human to you?* – To spare someone shame. *What is the seal of having become free?* – No longer to be ashamed before oneself.” In the ‘Prologue’, Zarathustra tries to exude an air of benign dispassion, but he is in inward turmoil over the pathos of the human condition.

# FOUR

Zarathustra, however, looked at the people and was amazed. Then he spoke thus:

‘The human is a rope, fastened between beast and Overhuman – a rope over an abyss.

‘A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still.

‘What is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not a goal: what can be loved in the human is that it is a *going-over* and a *going-under*.

‘I love those who do not know how to live except by going under, for they are those who go over and across.

‘I love the great despisers, for they are the great reverers and arrows of yearning for the other shore.

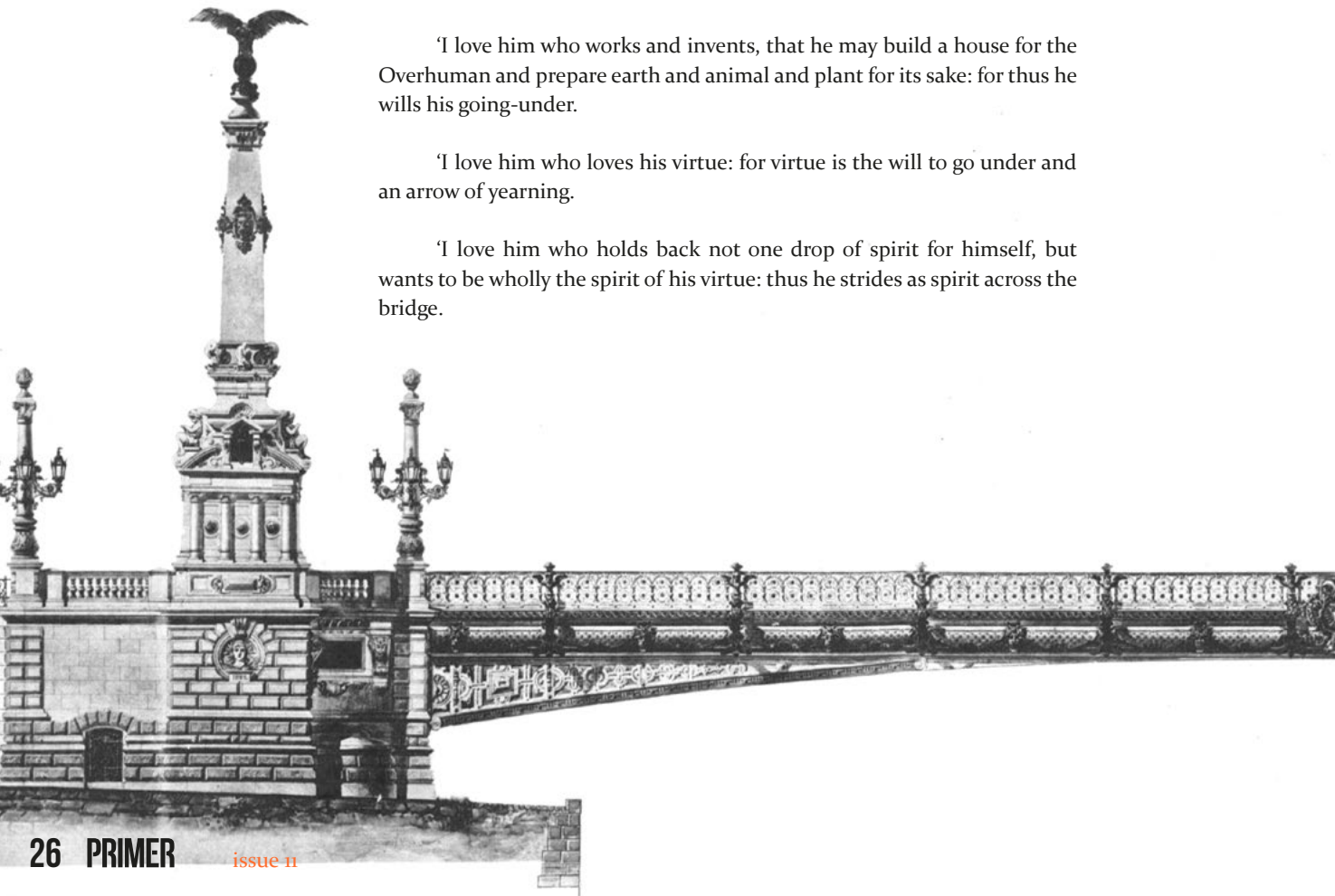
‘I love those who do not first seek behind the stars for a reason to go under and be sacrifices, but who sacrifice themselves to the earth, that the earth may one day belong to the Overhuman.

‘I love him who lives in order to understand, and who wants to understand so that one day the Overhuman may live. And thus he wills his going-under.

‘I love him who works and invents, that he may build a house for the Overhuman and prepare earth and animal and plant for its sake: for thus he wills his going-under.

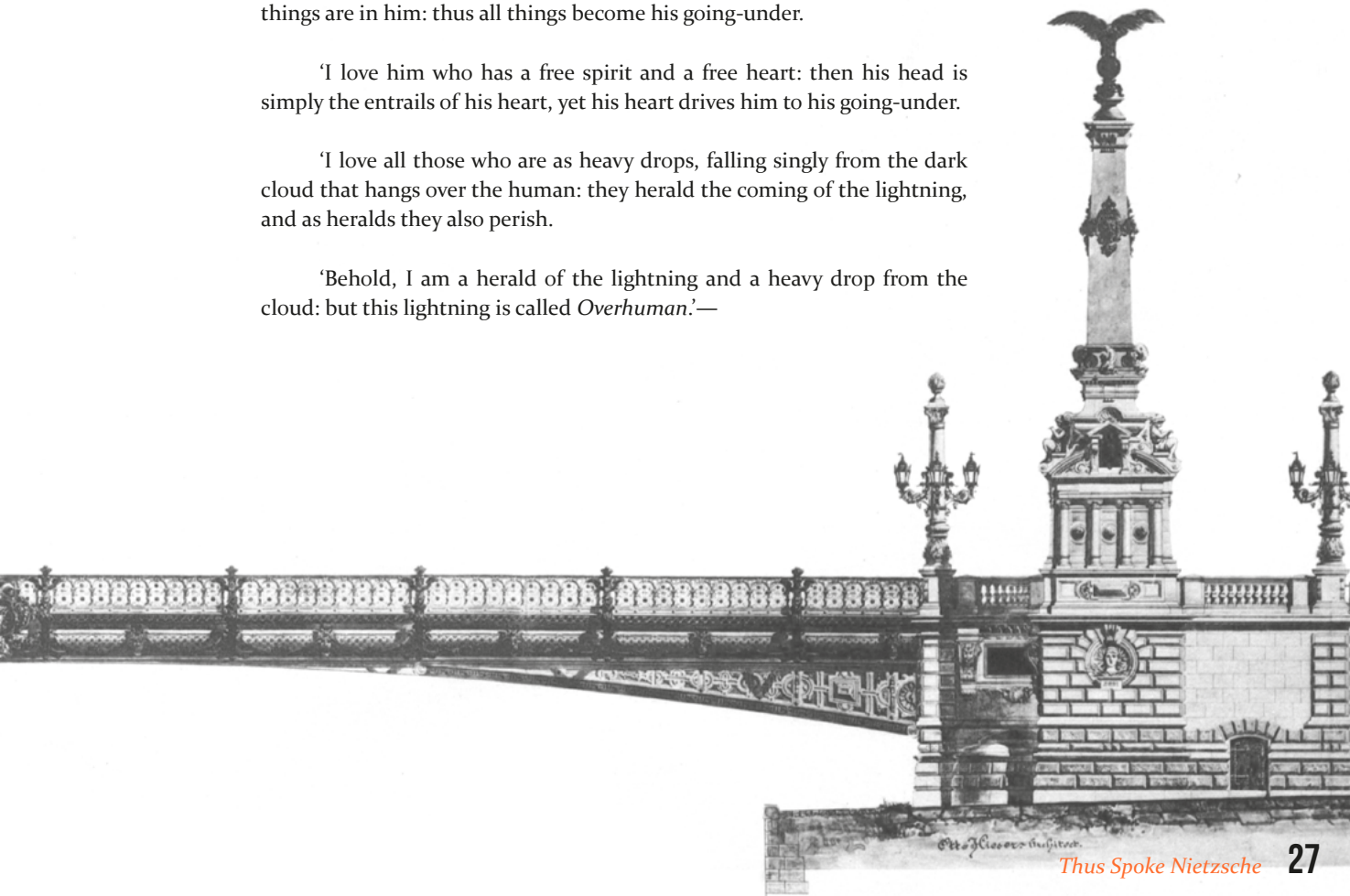
‘I love him who loves his virtue: for virtue is the will to go under and an arrow of yearning.

‘I love him who holds back not one drop of spirit for himself, but wants to be wholly the spirit of his virtue: thus he strides as spirit across the bridge.





‘Behold, I am a herald of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightning is called *Overhuman*.’—



Viewed generically, humanity is a bridge; the individual human must cross it by exchanging one psychological condition for another. To change the metaphor, to be human is to be a rope stretched over the abyss. It is a giddy abyss and the prospect of human transition is giddy. The interpretation of this passage is controversial. Possibly, the point is that crossing over the bridge involves a spiritual 'going-under', an immersion in the tasks and projects described in the terms set out in this section of the preface. He who loses his life will find it. Undertaking the spiritual exercises listed in this chapter constitutes a 'going-under' which enables the desired state of 'going-over', the transition to new life. On this interpretation, this is a preparation for overhumanity.

Zarathustra is not the 'Overhuman', but his herald. Although he summons everyone with ears to hear to a task of self-overcoming, Nietzsche elsewhere shares a messianic vision:

"[S]omeday, in a stronger time than this decaying, self-doubting present, he really must come to us, the *redeeming* human being of great love and contempt... whose solitude is misunderstood by the common people as if it were a flight from reality, whereas it is merely his immersion, burial, absorption *in* reality, so that someday when he again comes to light he can bring home with him the *redemption* of this reality: its redemption from the curse placed on it by the previous ideal... from the great nausea, from the will to nothingness, from nihilism... that gives back to the earth its goal and to humanity its hope; this anti-Christian and anti-nihilist; this conqueror of God and of nothingness – *someday he must come...*" (*On the Genealogy of Morality*).

Nietzsche is sometimes described as a philosopher of nihilism, the belief that there are no values, objective purpose or meaning in life. However, as he saw it, nihilism was a condition into which Europeans had entered because belief in God has robbed them of their true humanity. He sees himself as the vanquisher of nihilism, affirming life and value-creation. Both an individual and a cultural process is involved in the transition from the moribund Christian world to a new order. It is not an inclusively new social order: few will find it. Humans must individually make themselves, nihilism is what stands in the way of that.



When Zarathustra had spoken these words, he looked at the people again and was silent. 'There they stand,' he said to his heart, 'there they laugh: they do not understand me, I am not the mouth for these ears.

'Must one first smash their ears before they learn to hear with their eyes? Must one rumble like kettledrums and preachers of repentance? Or do they only believe a stammerer?

'They have something of which they are proud. But what do they call that which makes them proud? Culture, they call it: it distinguishes them from goatherds.

'Therefore they dislike hearing the word "despising" said of them.



So now I will speak to their pride.

‘So I will speak to them of what is most despicable: and that is the last human.’

And thus spoke Zarathustra to the people:

‘The time has now come for the human to set a goal for itself. The time has now come for the human to plant the seed of its highest hope.

‘Its soil is still rich enough for that. But this soil will some day become poor from cultivation, and no tall tree will be able to grow from it.

‘Alas! The time will come when the human will no longer shoot the arrow of its yearning over beyond the human, and the string of its bow will have forgotten how to whirl!

‘I say to you: one must still have chaos within, in order to give birth to a dancing star. I say to you: you still have chaos within you.

‘Alas! The time will come when the human will give birth to no more stars. Alas! There will come the time of the most despicable human, who is no longer able to despise itself.

‘Behold! I show to you *the last human*.

‘ “What is love? What is creation? What is yearning? What is a star?”  
– thus asks the last human and then blinks.

‘For the earth has now become small, and upon it hops the last human, who makes everything small. Its race is as inexterminable as the ground-flea; the last human lives the longest.

‘ “We have contrived happiness” – say the last humans and they blink.

‘They have left the regions where the living was hard, for one needs the warmth. One still loves one’s neighbour and rubs up against him: for one needs the warmth.

‘To fall ill and harbour mistrust is in their eyes sinful: one must proceed with care. A fool, whoever still stumbles over stones or humans!

‘A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And a lot of poison at the end, for an agreeable dying.

‘One continues to work, for work is entertainment. But one takes care lest the entertainment become a strain.



‘One no longer becomes poor or rich: both are too burdensome. Who wants to rule any more? Who wants to obey? Both are too burdensome.

‘No herdsman and one herd! Everyone wants the same thing, everyone is the same: whoever feels differently goes voluntarily into the madhouse.

‘ “Formerly the entire world was mad” – say their finest and they blink.

‘One is clever and knows all that has happened: so there is no end to their mockery. One still quarrels, but one soon makes up – else it is bad for the stomach.

‘One has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night: but one honours good health.

‘ “We have invented happiness” – say the last humans and they blink. —’

And here ended Zarathustra’s first speech, which is also called ‘the Prologue’: for at this point the clamour and delight of the crowd interrupted him. ‘Give us this last human, O Zarathustra’ – so they cried – ‘Turn us into these last humans! Then you can have the Overhuman!’ And the people all jubilated and clucked with their tongues. But Zarathustra became sad and said to his heart:

‘They do not understand me: I am not the mouth for these ears. “Too long have I lived in the mountains, and too much have I listened to streams and trees: now I talk to them as to goatherds.

‘Unmoved is my soul and bright as the mountains in the morning. But they think I am cold and a mocker in fearful antics.

‘And now they behold me and laugh: and even as they laugh, they still hate me. There is ice in their laughter.

At the conclusion of Zarathustra’s first speech, the preface to the ‘Prologue’, we have a foretaste of his despair. The fact that culture is drifting from Christianity gives Nietzsche no consolation. For what is replacing Christianity? The answer is: doctrines of equality and human rights such as those embodied in socialism. Nietzsche expresses his disgust at these in various writings. Their outwardly secular form conceals an inner Christian inspiration. Christianity is egalitarian – all are made in the image of God; all are sinners; love all your neighbours. This teaching is poisonous, infecting its successor systems. Europe is sinking in a culture of mediocrity. There is not much time left. Zarathustra’s hearers are happily swimming in it. Modern men are the last men in a sorry tale of decline. It does not really get better in the rest of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

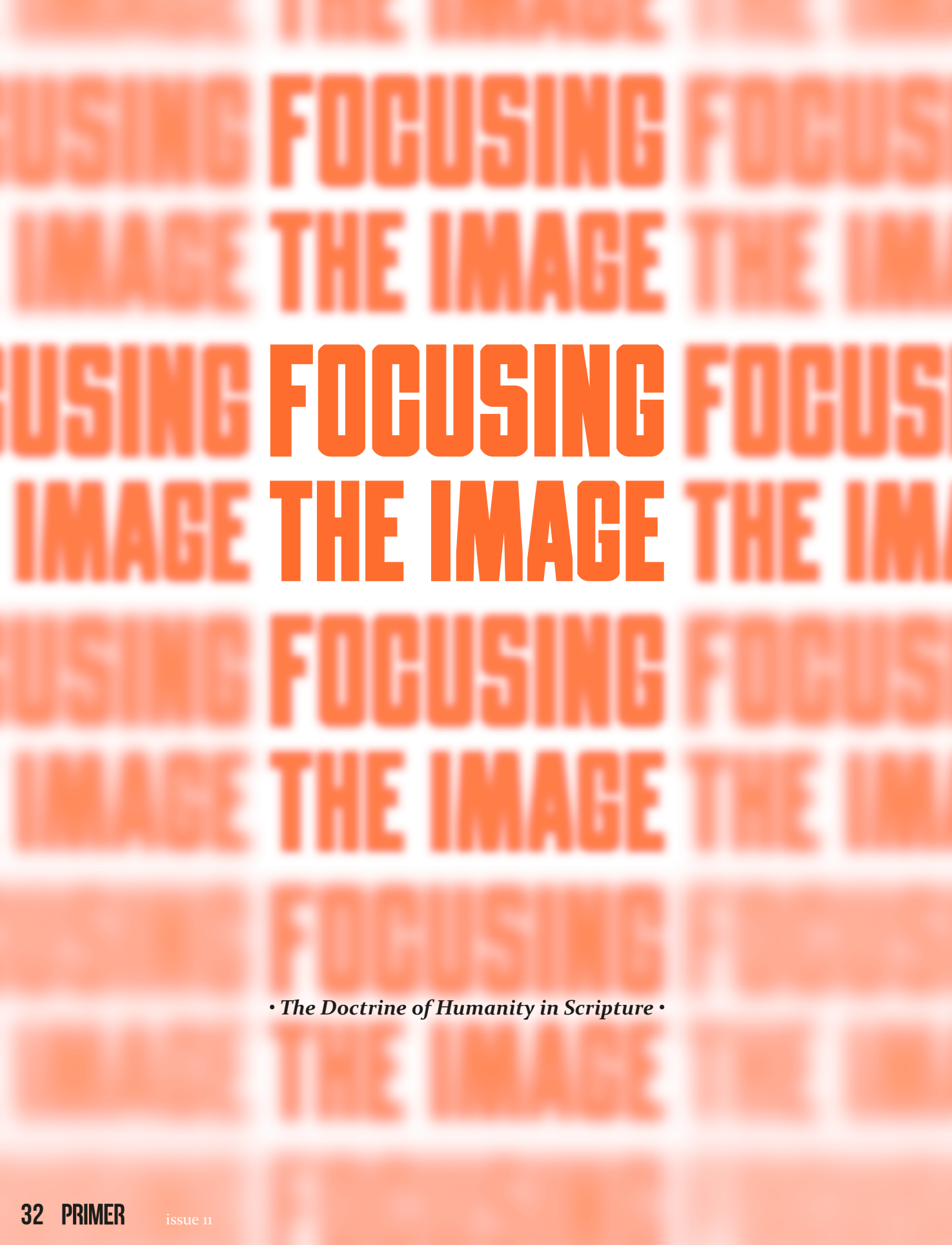


While chilling them to the marrow, Nietzsche has sometimes earned the respect of Christians for clarifying what the European alternative to Christianity really was. That is to say, he uncompromisingly champions the sovereign, autonomous individual. In the section of his *Church Dogmatics* which deals with 'The Basic Form of Humanity', Karl Barth included a discussion of Nietzsche, observing that "he resolutely and passionately rejected, not a caricature of the Christian conception of humanity, but in the form of a caricature the conception itself. He shows us how necessary it is that we for our part must less violently but no less resolutely reject the conception of humanity of which he is a classical exponent" (III/2).

Some readers are frustrated by the absence of rigorous argument in Nietzsche but what he presents to us is a vision and what he generates is an atmosphere designed to dispose the reader spiritually to face the truth of godlessness. He said: 'Gradually it has occurred to me what every great philosophy has been so far: namely the personal confession of its author... [O]ne always does well... to ask oneself, in explaining how the most far-fetched metaphysical claims of a philosopher came about: at what morality is it (or is *he*) aimed?' (*Beyond Good and Evil*). Nietzsche's moral aim is to impart to us the knowledge that it is our responsibility to create our own values. That can only happen if man replaces God. That is what the preface to the 'Prologue' announces.

## Questions for further thought and discussion

1. How has this article helped you understand the significance of Nietzsche's famous slogan "God is dead"?
2. What do you think Nietzsche would say to each of the authors Sarah Allen reviewed in the previous article?
3. Where do you see the fruits of Nietzsche's emphasis on individual self-creation and his rejection of self-abasement and humility in our culture? In the church?



# FOCUSING THE IMAGE

• *The Doctrine of Humanity in Scripture* •





## HOW WE MUST LIVE IS DETERMINED BY OUR ANSWERS TO THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS OF OUR ORIGIN, PURPOSE, AND DESTINY.

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 33.

The preceding articles in this issue of *Primer* show how uncontroversial that claim is. Harari, Holland, and Nietzsche: they are all interrogating our origin, purpose, and destiny in order to understand how to live.

And, as we've seen, one of the great struggles of our secular culture is to derive a positive ethic from a materialist account of origins: if the Darwinian thought is that "man is but a worm," it is hard to argue that a man or woman possesses any more dignity or deserves any greater care than our wriggly cousins. Francis Schaeffer spoke of how this kind of materialism never had a basis for speaking about the dignity of man, just a fading Christian memory to build on. Indeed, he declared already back in 1972 that we are in post-Christian world in which "man is junk, and man can be treated as junk. If the embryo is in the way, ditch it. If the old person is in the way, throw him away."

This is not quite the insult it might seem, given that 1882 was the year Darwin published his less famous work *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms*. Indeed he praises the worm, saying "It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world." Nonetheless, humanity has nothing to distinguish it from any other organism.

Francis A. Schaeffer, *Back to Freedom and Dignity* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), 23.

So the origins question is central. But so too are the areas of purpose and destiny. Our own age is charged with an intense sense of purpose about all sorts of moral causes and the advancement of humanity. It is also charged with conflict, given the deep and sometimes well-founded suspicions that not every vision of humanity's purpose or destiny is what it seems, or necessarily pursued for the benefit of the many.

Into this maelstrom the Scriptures speak wonderfully clearly. By doing so they provide the church with a clear sense of its task, its own purpose, and they entrust to us a message that would both transform the world's self-understanding and resolve many of the conflicts that beset it. As Bavinck continues his train of thought, he indicates their contribution:

Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 33.



How we must live is determined by our answers to the most fundamental questions of our origin, purpose, and destiny. Scripture teaches us that the image of God belongs to the very essence of our humanity, created good, fallen, and redeemable in Christ.

For Bavinck, then, the biblical theme of the image of God is the way to explore those all-important questions of *origin, purpose* and *destiny*. In this article we'll test that thought under those headings.

## I. ORIGIN

Ps 8:3-4

*When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,  
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?*

It is not insignificant that a Christian answer to the origin question is charged with wonder. It is a wonder that emerges from grasping twin truths about humanity: that we are created from dust and crowned with glory.

### a. Created from dust

Most famously, Ps 8 asks the question: “What is mankind that you are mindful of them?” But so too does Ps 144 and it sharpens it:

Ps 144:3-4

*Lord, what are human beings that you care for them,  
mere mortals that you think of them?  
They are like a breath;  
their days are like a fleeting shadow.*

What generates this wonder is how insubstantial and fleeting humanity is. In the terms of Ps 144 we are breath and shadow. In Isa 40:6-7 we are grass:

Isa 40:6-7

*All people are like grass,  
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.  
The grass withers and the flowers fall,  
because the breath of the LORD blows on them.  
Surely the people are grass.*

While there is a moral fragility here – our faithfulness is like fading flower – there is a creaturely fragility here too, as the rest of Isa 40 makes more explicit, elevating YHWH (the LORD) over all the peoples of the earth. But perhaps the bluntest expression of this theme comes in Eccl 3:18-20.



**EccL 3:18-20**

*I also said to myself, "As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.*

Interpreting Ecclesiastes is not easy of course, but I take it to offer wisdom for living in a world that is both perishable and marked by sin. To say "everything is meaningless" is to say it is "breath," just as humanity is a "breath" in Ps 144 – that is to say, life is short, elusive, and repetitive [David Gibson's helpful terms for what "breath" signifies. See his *Destiny* (London: IVP, 2016), 3-12.]

There is a shared creatureliness, therefore, that needs to sink in. Man is not a worm, but we have more in common with a worm than our pride wants to allow. And if our origins are going to determine how we live to some degree then this invites a humility towards our Creator and a sense of solidarity with and concern for creation.

But, of course, none of this is to say that we are junk after all. Rather, we marvel that we are appointed along with the rest of creation to glorify him. And then we marvel, along with Psalm 8, that we are singled out amongst all creation for a particular privilege and calling.

### **b. Crowned with glory**

Psalm 8 once again:

**Ps 8:5-8**

*You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honour.  
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:  
all flocks and herds,  
and the animals of the wild,  
the birds in the sky,  
and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.*

If humanity sit squarely on the created side of the Creator/creature divide, they are also set apart from the rest of creation in vital ways. In the creation narrative the unique status of humanity is underlined in a whole number of ways: Humanity is created last. Humanity alone is created with deliberation: "Let us make man..." which makes that creative act more prominent. Uniquely, there is a threefold repetition of God creating humanity in Gen 1:27. Although God's provision of food is for every creature, it is only humanity who are directly addressed and granted that provision (1:29-30). And then, every other living thing is created "according to their kind" (Gen 1:11, 12, 21, 24). But humanity are created in the image of God (1:26, 27). In some sense that is our kind. Thus, in all sorts of ways, the creation narrative hints at the unique glory and honour of humanity. To explore those privileges any further, though, moves us into questions of our purpose.

## 2. PURPOSE

It is sometimes said that the image of God is strangely undefined in Genesis. In some respects, that is true, although understanding the cultural context in which Genesis emerges proves to be helpful and draws our attention to more material in Gen 1-2 than just 1:26-27.

It is now widely acknowledged that other ancient cultures spoke of human beings as images of God and that there are a wide range of ideas associated with that. To pick one famous example, this is an carving of Ashurnasirpal II a 9th century Assyrian king:



It is a picture of paradise. The tree of life is there at the centre, the god Ashur is represented above the tree, and the king pictured twice on either side, and outside him two angels. So a sacred space where the king dwells with his god, guarded by angelic beings.

The scene reflects a common notion in Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures: that kings have unique access to the gods. They are living,



breathing idols – representations of the gods – mediating the god’s blessings and due the same reverence that the god is due. To speak of someone as God’s image, therefore, is to speak about a role conferred upon them, a purpose. They are created or appointed as images, that they might represent another.

That Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) background is helpful to grasp because it contrasts with Genesis in two stark ways.

### a. Who are images?

For Genesis, the image of God is not the elite – some royal or priestly class set apart from the rest of humanity. It is every human. Adam and Eve are not set apart over and above their offspring but representative of them. We see us, with them, in the sanctuary in Eden.

The point is well made by Richard Lints:



Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015), 70.

In contrast to the pagan mythologies of royal dominion, Genesis 1 affirms the royal reflection in all of humankind and not simply the king or other office holder. It is humankind considered as a whole that represents the invisible bodiless God. The entire human race is God’s royal stand-in.

Notice that. Genesis is a revolutionary text but not in a republican direction. It is not against kingship. Rather it crowns all humanity. It teaches us to see every human being in that place of exultation. “Only a little lower than the angels.” “Crowned with glory and honour.” So, who are images? All humanity.

And then there’s another key contrast with ANE cultures.

### b. Who are they imaging?

Ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation are often epics of violence, power, and servitude. This world is often described as the aftermath or the spoils of a cosmic battle rather than the very good creation of order out of chaos.

In John Walton’s summary, “the literature everywhere agrees that people were created to do the work the gods were tired of doing and to provide for the gods’ needs.” To give just one example of that:



1.195-97 Mesopotamian  
*Atrahasis Epic*.

Create a human being that he may bear the yoke,  
Let him bear the yoke, the task of Enlil (the high god).  
Let man assume the drudgery of god.

John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

What's important to see is that is not just some abstract cosmology but something that becomes embedded in social practice. It sets up a structure where the king in his temple/court is fed and cared for just as if he were the god. As Richard Middleton highlights:



Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image*  
(Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 173.

If the purpose of the mass of humanity is to serve the gods and if the king represents those gods as their son and image, the gods are served precisely by serving the king, who wills the present social order.

Now, contrast that with the God in whose image we are made:

**A God who is not served by human hands**, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else (Acts 17:25). A God who relates to his creation only as giver.

**A God who does not despise weakness.** “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him, for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (Ps 103:13-14).

**A God who invites us into his eternal rest** rather than creating minions for eternal work.

**A God of life, who nurtures and multiplies.** This must have been such a striking contrast to the ANE gods and then later to Pharaoh during the captivity. For those rulers the multiplication of people can only ever be a threat because we are competitors in a zero sum game for power. But God is a god of such maximal life that he is free to say “be fruitful and multiply.”

That is the God whom we are called to image and it has massive implications for our ethics.

Middleton once more:



Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 295.

The sort of power or rule that humans are to exercise is generous, loving power. It is power used to nurture, enhance, and empower others, non-coercively, for their benefit, not for the self-aggrandizement of the one exercising power.

### ***c. What does it mean to image God?***

Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5-3:24 in Light of the Mīs Pi Pīt Pī and Wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt*, Siphrot : Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 15 (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

We'll answer that question with three terms from Catherine MacDowell's work where she fills out the image of God in terms of *kinship*, *kingship* and *cult*.

First, *kinship*. To be made in the image of God is to belong to his family. That seems clear from Gen 5 where image language is recalled from Gen 1 and applied in a human genealogy:



Gen 5:1-3

When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them "Mankind" when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.

There's an indication here that to be made in someone's image is to be a son to them. The same thought is echoed in a much later genealogy, in Luke 3, where Jesus is identified (after many intervening generations) as "the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (3:38). In this instance, Jesus is the son of God by virtue of his humanity – God's offspring in the same way we all are (Acts 17:29). It's a remarkable theme that increases a sense of wonder. The language of "images" could objectify us as instruments or artefacts in God's hands, but God relates to his images as a father to a child. As Gavin Ortlund suggests:



Gavin Ortlund, "Image of Adam, Son of God: Genesis 5:3 and Luke 3:38 in Intercanonical Dialogue," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57.4 (2014): 688.

From the vantage point of Gen 5:3, it is valid and even illuminating to associate the question, "What does it mean to say that we are created in the image of God?" with the question, "How does it feel to hold your child in your arms for the very first time?"

Then *kingship*. The notion of rule is there in Psalm 8 where we have been crowned with glory and honour, appointed rulers over the works of God's hands. Likewise, in Gen 1:16, God says "let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule..." It is important to notice the purpose clause here. The image of God cannot simply be reduced to the activity of ruling, but we are images for that purpose. It's where the ANE background provides a parallel: gods set their image-bearing sons and kings in the world to be a representative presence. So too does God. But, as we have said, we have a distinctive God and Father to image. There's a sense in which we should play God, but the role is constrained by his character and goodness.

The connections we've been tracing between images, sons and kings, are also reflected in ANE literature e.g. Pharaoh is described as "the shining image of the lord of all and a creation of the gods of Heliopolis... He has begotten him, in order to create a shining seed on earth, for salvation for men, as his living image." In another text, the Egyptian god Amon-Re says to the king Amenophis III, "you are my beloved son, who came forth from my members, my image, whom I have put on earth." For these and other references, see David J.A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 84-85.

And then *cult*. When God places Adam in the garden in Gen 2:15 he is established as a priest in a sanctuary. That would be the inescapable conclusion for any Israelite reader given the parallels between Eden and Israel's temple. Like the temple, Eden is the place where God dwells with his people. Adam is placed there to "work it and take care of it" – verbs that will be used of those who serve and guard in the tabernacle (e.g. Num 3:7-8, Ezek 44:14). Eden, like the temple in Ezekiel, has rivers flowing from it (Gen 2:10; Ezek 47:1-12); it has precious stones and metals that will be used in the decoration of temple and priestly garments (Gen Exod 25:3-7, 28:6-14); it is guarded by cherubim (Gen 3:24; 1 Kings 6:29) and entered from the East (Gen 3:24; Ezek 40:6).

For the references below and many more, see G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 66-75.

It's a way of saying that humans are created with a holy calling: to serve their God and mediate his blessings to the world. We are set apart to image our Creator in holiness and righteousness. That's why the New Testament will talk about the restored image in these terms. In Ephesians, believers "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

So what does it mean to be made in the image of God? It signifies a purpose, a vocation defined in terms of kin, kingship and cult. And we'll see that more clearly in a moment when we look beyond Genesis.

But first, I want to anticipate one question about the danger of functional definitions. You might be thinking 'if we are defining the image of God in these ways then how can we say that everyone is made in the image of God?'

There is a proper concern here. Because what if someone isn't behaving like a son of God, or a priest in holiness and righteousness? **Have they lost the image of God entirely?** We have the same issue when we define the image in terms of rationality or creativity or rule. If someone has impaired mental or physical ability, does that make them less human? One can easily imagine how dark that road would be to travel.

Lutherans commonly define the image of God quite specifically as the original righteousness and holiness of Adam, arguing that fallen human beings have therefore lost the image of God.

A couple of key texts will allow us to address this concern. First, Gen 9:5-6 makes the image of God the decisive factor in the value of a human life, and clearly ascribes the image to fallen humanity.

Gen 9:5-6

*And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.*

*'Whoever sheds human blood,  
by humans shall their blood be shed;  
for in the image of God  
has God made mankind.*

There are no exceptions to that, even in a humanity whose "every inclination is evil" (Gen 9:21). Thus the great beauty of this doctrine is that it is not something we need to qualify for and it is not something that age or illness can take away. Nor can sin, for that matter. However dehumanising it is, sin can never turn us into something *else*.

So all humanity is created in the image of God. But how does that fit with my argument that ties the image of God so closely to a purpose or calling? Two comments might be helpful.

First, a thing can have a value and a beauty arising from its purpose regardless of whether it is put to that purpose. A communion cup sits on my bookcase. It is an old and tarnished silver cup I once found on a building site, collecting rain. Its significance was undiminished. There





was a sense of tragedy about is disuse or misuse, but no loss of value. We should see something like that as we contemplate humanity. Humanity no longer pursues its holy calling in the image of God. A different kind of kinship and kingship and cult emerges. We see humanity rejecting its Father and embracing the devil as a surrogate father (John 8:34-47); we see kings ruling now for their own benefit or abdicating power in neglectful ways; or as priests who have abandoned their holy calling and now serve at the altars of idols, being conformed to their destructive image. As Michael Horton says, “It is not that we are no longer human after the fall, but that we abuse our office in self-interest.”

Michael Horton, “Post-Reformation Reformed Anthropology,” in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 62.

Second, to say that a human being is made in God’s image means that they belong to him. It might be tragic if they fail to live out their purpose but they will always belong to God and on that account be due the respect that God is due.

That’s the direction the other key verse goes – James 3:9. He condemns the way that *with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.*

His point is that if we properly honoured God we would honour the images we meet in each and every face. For his sake. Now I think that’s particularly striking. We must avoid functional definitions that risk excluding some people, but we must also avoid what we might call autonomous definitions that exclude God. There’s a danger we talk about *inherent* dignity and value, rather than thinking this person is due the honour I would give the one in whose image they are made. A proper sense of our origins and purpose can only heighten the sense of another person’s worth and significance in our eyes.

So, we have considered our origins and purpose. Finally, let’s think about destiny.

### 3. DESTINY

We’ll be brief here, but it’s helpful as we engage with alternative visions of humanity’s future.

First, it is clear in Scripture that God will not abandon humanity to its sin. The call of Noah and of Abraham recall God’s purposes for Adam (note the repetition of be fruitful and multiply in Gen 9:1 - and God’s plans to multiply the seed of Abraham in Gen 15:5). More strikingly still, Israel is called out of Egypt and placed in the Promised Land as God’s son (Hos 11:1), called to be a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6; oh look: kinship, kingship, and cult once more). In that way, Israel looks back to Adam and forward to God’s own Son, our high priest and king.



As we often note, Jesus' ministry means that the image of God is restored in us (Eph 4:24), but he accomplishes much more than a reversal of the fall. His faithful work brings original humanity to its intended destiny. To grasp this point, we need to see Genesis as the beginning but not the goal. The Bible story is not simply the story Milton told of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. But rather *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Fulfilled*. This is something the creation narratives themselves point to.

For the connection between ruling and rest, see Ps 132:7-8, 13-14, Isa 66:1 where the temple is associated with God's resting place, throne room and footstool.

One way to see that in Genesis is to observe the pattern where God subdues and names and fills creation and then rests. He has created a sanctuary and from there he now **rests and reigns**. He then sets humanity the task of ruling and naming and filling creation with an implicit invitation to enter into that reign and rest also. As Scott Swain says of Genesis 1-2,



Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

The presence of God's covenant relationship [with Adam], with its divinely appointed goal of entering God's rest, reveals that this pattern is not a static picture. It is more like the setting of a story. If Adam is to fulfil his role as God's creaturely vice-regent, serving the spread of God's glory to the ends of the earth, and if Adam is to inherit everlasting rest in God's presence, then he must take the hand of his wise and generous Father and walk in obedience to his commands.

Then there are the differences between Eden and the new heavens and the new earth. Humanity is prevented from accessing the tree of life in Genesis but it has pride of place in Revelation, "and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2). By contrast, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is absent from Revelation. This is another indication that we are not simply back to Eden. I suspect it also signifies that humanity has reached maturity in Christ. The "knowledge of good and evil" is not a kind of forbidden knowledge in Scripture, but rather the mark of mature wisdom, and sometimes associated with kingship (see Deut 1:39, 1 Kings 3:7-9, 2 Sam 14:17, 19:35, Heb 5:14). Perhaps, then, the tree represents the maturity humanity would reach, but only by virtue of the one who would learn obedience in submission to God.

This secures a new and imperishable existence for humanity, a point also made in Paul's contrast between the earthly and perishable state of Adam, and the new glorified, imperishable state of Christ which we will share in at the resurrection (see 1 Cor 15:42-54).

Much more could be said about this, but let's notice one key implication. It might feel like Christian accounts of humanity look back to Eden, to a Golden Age, without much reference to the future. We might be tempted to leave that to the dystopian dramas or the transhumanist dreamers. But Christians are profoundly optimistic about the future of humanity, and in a certain sense, its future upgrade. There are, in fact, some definitions of transhumanism that I think describe the Christian hope rather well:

Julian Huxley, *New Bottles for New Wine: Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), 17.



Man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realising new possibilities of and for his human nature.

But any hope for the future is anchored in Christ. His earthly life embodies the true calling of humanity, his resurrection represents the destiny of all his people, and these are both tightly bound to the restoration of sonship, loving rule, and holiness.

It's a point well made by the theologian Philip Ziegler. He notes the promise of radical transformation amongst the transhumanist movement but sees the constraints placed upon those ambitions by the gospel:



Ziegler, "“Those He Also Glorified,”” 174.

This “radical transformation does not come at the cost of fellowship with either God or one another, but rather includes and perfects it. This emphasis calls into question the propriety and fittingness of any and all technological development of our humanity which are indifferent to, or even contemptuous of, the fundamental social and relational reality of our existence before God.”

Put another way, and drawing our thoughts together, every effort to pursue human flourishing and happiness in this world must be aligned to the origins, purpose, and destiny of humanity, created in the image of God. One of the life-giving aspects of that is how certain our hope can be, for it depends not on our ability to engineer such a future for ourselves, but on what God has already accomplished in his Son.

## Questions for further thought and discussion

1. The rest of this issue of *Primer* will apply the doctrine of humanity to issues of technology, the beginnings of life and the use of power. After reading this article, what connections would you start to draw?
2. What do you think is the evangelistic significance of the doctrine of humanity as described here?
3. As you reflect on the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, how was that experience humanising for you? Your church? Our society? And how was it dehumanising?

*“There are no ordinary people.”*







*You have never talked to a mere mortal.”*

GHOST

IN

THE

MACHINE

THE IMAGE OF GOD  
AND TECHNOLOGY

Intriguingly, human beings  
have always tried to understand  
themselves by comparison with the  
leading technologies of the time. In  
the opening pages of his *Treatise on  
Man*, René Descartes wrote:

**JOHN WYATT** is Emeritus Professor  
of Neonatal Paediatrics, Ethics and  
Perinatology at University College  
London and a Senior Researcher at the  
Faraday Institute, Cambridge. His book  
*Matters of Life and Death* is published  
by IVP and he and his wife Celia are  
long-standing members of All Souls  
Church, London.

 @johnswyatt



“ I make the supposition that the body is nothing else but  
a statue or earthen machine, that God has willed to form  
entire... We see clocks, artificial fountains, mills, and  
other similar machines, which, being only made by men,  
nevertheless do not lack the force to move themselves in  
several diverse means. And it seems to me that, as it is made  
by the hand of God, I cannot imagine how many kinds of  
movements there are in it.

Descartes concluded that all our bodily functions followed from “the mere arrangement of the machine’s organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counter weights and wheels.” Throughout his treatise, published posthumously, Descartes refers to his own human body as “this machine,” contributing to a strange sense of estrangement from the realities of bodily existence.

Since precision clockwork mechanisms represented the pinnacle of technological creation, it seemed obvious to many thinkers that the best way to understand the human body was to view it as some kind of clockwork mechanism. Here is the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Denis Diderot: “Consider man as a walking clock, his heart is the mainspring, the contents of the thorax are the principle parts of the works, in his head are the bells, complete with little hammers... and the soul is the tiny figure on the top listening to the music of the chimes.” In his controversial book *L’Homme Machine* (usually translated *Man as Machine*), published in 1743, the atheist philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie wrote “the human body is a machine which winds its own springs. It is the living image of perpetual movement.”

Diderot, *Letter on the Deaf and Mute*, 1751.



With the rise of steam power and new forms of hydraulic technology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, clockwork metaphors increasingly give way to hydraulic imagery. The steam engine is now the outstanding technical innovation of the age. So the human body is now conceived as a system of tubes and chambers filled with incompressible fluids. It has often been pointed out that Sigmund Freud's model of human psychology is at root an extended hydraulic metaphor, with libido conceived as an incompressible fluid, channelled within the subterranean tubes of the mind. The superego works like a regulatory valve mechanism to ensure the internal psychic pressure is controlled. Just as a steam engine might explode if excessive pressure was not safely released, so the human psyche was at risk of excessive internal forces leading to potentially destructive consequences!

In the mid-1800s, inspired by recent advances in communications, the German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz moved beyond hydraulics and suggested that the brain could be conceived as a telegraphic system. In the telegraph, as in the nervous system, what produced meaning was not the signals themselves but the receiving apparatus. "In the network of telegraphs," he wrote, "we find everywhere the same copper or iron wires carrying the same kind of movement, a stream of electricity, but producing the most different results in the various stations according to the auxiliary apparatus with which they are connected."

Hermann von Helmholtz,  
*Science and Culture: Popular  
and Philosophical Essays*,  
ed. David Cahan (Chicago:  
University of Chicago Press,  
1995), 150.

## HUMANS AS MACHINES: NOT A HARMLESS COMPARISON

Here in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is information technology and machine intelligence that have become the most advanced forms of human ingenuity available to us, so we should not be surprised that humans are being increasingly seen as information processing machines. "The brain happens to be a meat machine" stated Mervin Minsky, the robotics pioneer. To philosopher Daniel Dennett, "we're robots made of robots made of robots. We're incredibly complex, trillions of moving parts. But they're all non-miraculous robotic parts." In his book *Life 3.0*, physicist Mark Tegmark concludes that human life can be seen as a "self-replicating information processing system."

Physicist Sean Carroll wrote, "When asked for my thoughts about machines that think, I can't help but reply: Hey, those are my friends you're talking about. We are all machines that think, and the distinction between different types of machines is eroding."

There is some debate about the origins of the phrase but the quote is ascribed to Minsky and was regularly stated by him.

In an interview with John Thornhill, "Philosopher Daniel Dennett on AI, Robots and Religion," *Financial Times* (London, 3 March 2017).

Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (London: Penguin, 2018), 25.

Sean Carroll, 'What Do You Think about Machines that Think?' See *Edge.org*. In 2015 the magazine posed this question to a number of different contributors and published their responses.

Back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was Thomas Hobbes, in his master work *Leviathan*, who was probably the first to draw a direct comparison between thinking and computation. He wrote “for ‘reason’... is nothing but ‘reckoning,’ that is adding and subtracting, of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the ‘marking’ and ‘signifying’ of our thoughts.”

*The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* (ed. William Molesworth; 11 vols.; London: John Bohn, 1839-45), 3:30.

It took several centuries for this comparison to come to prominence, but psychologist Steven Pinker points to the significance of Hobbes’ initial idea.



Steven Pinker, ‘What Do You Think about Machines that Think?’, *Edge.org*.

Thomas Hobbes’s pithy equation of reasoning as ‘nothing but reckoning’ is one of the great ideas in human history... The cognitive feats of the brain can be explained in physical terms: To put it crudely (and critics notwithstanding), we can say that beliefs are a kind of information, thinking a kind of computation, and motivation a kind of feedback and control. This is a great idea because it completes a naturalistic understanding of the universe, exorcising occult souls, spirits, and ghosts in the machine. Just as Darwin made it possible for a thoughtful observer of the natural world to do without creationism, Turing and others made it possible for a thoughtful observer of the cognitive world to do without spiritualism.

Pinker points to the attraction of the computer metaphor for moderns who are wedded to a purely materialistic understanding of the universe. We don’t need to worry that there might be something non-material or spiritual, some kind of transcendent purpose or meaning, which is hidden behind the miracle of our humanity. We can relax and enjoy ourselves. We are just information-processing machines.

Of course, there is a certain truth behind the idea that the brain can be viewed as a machine. There are certain aspects of our human functioning that can usefully be seen as similar to that of a machine. In other words the machine is a useful *metaphor* for certain aspects of our humanity. The machine metaphor has been extremely successful in fields such as human physiology, molecular biology, genetics, cognitive neuropsychology, and so on. But there is a critical difference between a helpful metaphor, and a definition, a description of core reality. Yes, it may be helpful to say that a human being is *like a computer*, but to say that a human being is *a computer* is just plain incoherent.

But this is much more profound and subtle than just a confused way of thinking; it becomes a way of perceiving. Metaphors have profound and pervasive effects on our culture and the ‘information processing machine’ is becoming a dominant paradigm by which we understand our own humanity. We talk of human beings as ‘hard-wired’, ‘suffering from information overload’, ‘programmed for failure’, ‘needing a reboot.’ It is commonplace to take the computer concepts of software and hardware

and apply them to our own humanity. The hardware (often dismissively referred to as *wetware*) is the physical stuff of our brains – nerve cells, connections, neurotransmitter chemicals. The software is the *information* that somehow resides in our brains – memories, perceptions, emotions, thoughts.

Metaphors illuminate, but they also obscure or distort. They change the way we see the world and our own human nature. As has often been said ‘to the person with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.’ To a coder with an algorithm, it is easy to see people as just a stream of data, waiting to be analysed, coded, stored and manipulated.

## **DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY PRIORITISES ‘INFORMATION’, AND ‘DATA’ AND TENDS TO DEVALUE HUMAN EMBODIMENT**

One of the lasting consequences of the 2020-21 coronavirus pandemic may be an accentuation and acceleration of the process whereby the significance of human embodiment – of being a physical person located at a particular point in time and space – is increasingly devalued and downplayed. Instead, technology encourages disembodied communication: the instantaneous extraction, transfer, multiplication, storage, and processing of abstract information.

It is also increasingly apparent that our created physicality has the effect of imposing limits on the widespread dissemination of evil. The disembodiment of digital technology has fostered terrible evils: social media abuse, cybercrime, broken relationships, trolling, bullying, internet scams and so on. Many of these are faceless interactions which diminish our appreciation of the cost and consequences of unloving words and actions. And then there is way that hurtful or harmful comments on social media platforms have an exponential potential to drag others into conflict.

And yet there is a powerful drive towards ever-increasing disembodiment. If we understand ourselves as ‘machines made out of meat’, then it becomes increasingly plausible that machines made out of silicon will be able to reproduce our own thinking processes. Max Tegmark claims that “intelligence is ultimately about information and computation, not about flesh, blood or carbon atoms. This means that there’s no fundamental reason why machines can’t one day be at least as intelligent as us.”

This way of thinking seems to have strange resonances with the ancient Gnostic heresy which flourished in the first centuries of the Christian era. Gnosticism can be seen as a type of ‘default-heresy’ which recurs in many different forms over the history of the Christian church. In its original form, Gnosticism saw the human body as “a rapacious sea which robs and

Tegmark, *Life 3.0*, 55.



devours,” a stinking prison in which the soul, the divine particle of light, was trapped. Redemption was separation from the body, and death was celebrated as liberation of the light from the dungeon of materiality.

In the latest materialist version of Gnosticism, the real core of our humanity, the divine spark, is now reconceived as ‘information’ which can be extracted and processed in a disembodied form, whilst the physical body is denigrated as pathetic, out-moded and increasingly unfit for the modern world.

The performance artist Stelarc expresses a sense of dissatisfaction with his own humanity. “It is time to question whether a bipedal, breathing body with binocular vision and a 1400cc brain is an adequate biological form. It cannot cope with the quantity, complexity and quality of information it has accumulated; it is intimidated by the precision, speed and power of technology and it is biologically ill-equipped to cope with its new extraterrestrial environment.”

Popular science texts reinforce this peculiarly modern form of self-loathing. Take for example *The Idiot Brain* by Dean Burnett, subtitled *A Neuroscientist Explains What Your Head is Really Up To*. Here’s a flavour:



Dean Burnett, *The Idiot Brain: A Neuroscientist Explains What Your Head Is Really Up To* (London: Guardian Faber, 2017), 3.

The brain is still an internal organ in the human body, and as such is a tangled mess of habits, traits, outdated processes and inefficient systems. In many ways, the brain is a victim of its own success; it’s evolved over millions of years to reach this current level of complexity, but as a result it has accrued a great deal of junk, like a hard drive riddled with old software programs and obsolete downloads that interrupt basic processes.

Many other examples could be quoted of popular scientists and philosophers who deride what is now often referred to as ‘folk psychology’ – the ‘illusion’ that we have freedom of choice; our common-sense belief that we are morally accountable for our actions; our sense of continuing identity over time; our ability to reason; and so on. Of course most of these statements are self-defeating, since if the human brain is as faulty as is frequently claimed, there’s no reason to believe any of the confident conclusions of the neuroscientists! Neuroscience seems to be demonstrating that the findings of neuroscience must be unreliable, if not downright false.

## HUMANS + TECHNOLOGY:

## THE TRANSHUMANIST PROJECT

Despite the recurring science fiction tropes of dystopian futures and apocalyptic battles, the dominant technological narrative that now

See Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. P. W. Coxon, K. H. Kuhn, and R. McL. Wilson (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 112.

‘Obsolete Bodies,’ accessed at [stelarc.org](http://stelarc.org).

emanates from places like Silicon Valley and its tech giants is one of profound optimism. After millennia of suffering, restriction and frustration, humans are about to enter the sunlit uplands. Techno-optimism creates a vision of a future in which human enhancement and intelligent machines enable every aspect of life to become frictionless. Every desire, every longing, every interest will be satisfied instantly and effortlessly in the digital and virtual realm. The quasi-religious cult of techno-optimism, leads naturally to the *transhumanist* project.

If the human nature that we inherited from our parents is so grossly inadequate, we do not need to despair. Technology can provide a solution. As Christina Bieber Lake puts it, transhumanist thinking “is merely a logical extension of the increasing confidence that late modern people have placed in finding technological solutions to problems.” As befits its primary source within the USA, the transhumanist project has a strongly libertarian focus. But freedom is conceived as the overcoming of limitations. It is ‘freedom from’, rather than ‘freedom for’. Freedom from suffering, from fatigue, from ageing. All the restrictions imposed on me by my human nature are to be overcome.

Christina Bieber Lake,  
*Prophets of the Posthuman:  
American Fiction,  
Biotechnology, and the  
Ethics of Personhood*  
(Indiana: University of  
Notre Dame, 2013), xii.

An abiding narrative is that Darwinian evolution, driven by blind chance, has left us in a deeply unsatisfactory condition. As philosopher John Harris puts it, we should not make a “fetish of a particular evolutionary stage.” Instead we have a moral duty to intervene in the lottery of life. Harris argues that there is a moral imperative to use technology to change and enhance our capacities if it will lead to better outcomes and greater life satisfaction. The only argument for restraining human enhancement is if there is evidence that it is seriously harmful to others and that these harms are real and present, not future and speculative.

John Harris, *Enhancing  
Evolution: The Ethical Case  
for Making Better People*  
(Princeton: Princeton  
University Press, 2007), 16.

The transhumanist project becomes a seductive response to the inadequacies and deficiencies of human nature. Although the extravagant ideas of mind-uploading, cyborg bodies and radical life-extension are still in the realms of science fiction, various examples of ‘low-tech transhumanism’ are already enshrined in modern culture. Cosmetic surgery enables me to change my body’s appearance, psychoactive drugs allow me to manipulate my mood and cognitive functioning, trans-surgery enables me to change my gender and reproductive technology gives me the option of altering the genetic inheritance of my children. Transhumanism is alive and well and hiding in plain sight.

Of course, there is a striking incoherence in these dominant narratives of our time. On the one hand libertarians celebrate the absolute freedom of the self. My choices are sovereign. I am free to choose to do whatever I like with my body. The transhumanist project puts absolute reliance on individual autonomy. But at the same time neuroscience emphasises a kind of determinism, telling us that the ‘choosing self’ is an illusion created by our brains for survival purposes. Our sense of autonomy is simply a retrospective rationalisation of the hidden neurological processes which determine our behaviour.

These two profound ideas of our time – on the one hand that individual choice is sovereign, and on the other, that choice is an illusion – cannot both be true. In the end one of these great concepts must crumble. And there are many straws in the wind to suggest that ultimately scientific determinism will win. Determinism seems to represent a dagger aimed at the heart of liberalism. The more we learn about how the brain works, the more that knowledge will be used to ensure that people make the ‘choices’ that are deemed expedient. As C.S. Lewis presciently put it, “Man’s power over nature turns out to be power exerted by some men over other men.”

C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Glasgow: Collins, 1943), 35.

## HUMANS AS CREATURES: CELEBRATING, RESPECTING AND PROTECTING

How does historical Christian thinking engage with the pervasive impact of technology on our self-understanding as a species? It is striking that ancient Gnosticism was a major threat to the early church. It was superficially attractive in its condemnation of evil, and its promotion of esoteric spiritual wisdom for the enlightened, but the Gnostic contempt for the material world, and in particular for the human body, represented a dangerous and destructive heresy.

Many early church fathers, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Origen, and Eusebius amongst them, invested considerable time and energy in refuting the Gnostic heresy. The human body was part of the material creation and our human nature, made in the image of God and yet formed from the ground, was part of the creation and pronounced “very good” by the Creator. In place of the rigid dualism of the Gnostic worldview, the Fathers defended the complex multifaceted unity of the human frame.

But of course it was the incarnation, death, and bodily resurrection of Christ which provided the strongest grounds for the Fathers. The Christmas and Easter events were antithetical to the Gnostic worldview. We are so familiar with the words of John 1:14 that we have lost their scandalous nature – the divine Word became flesh, *sarx*.

Christians treat the human body with special respect. Why? Because this strange and idiosyncratic collection of 25,000 genes, 10 billion nerve cells, several miles of wiring, eight metres of intestinal plumbing, five litres of blood, and assorted biochemical processes – this is the form in which God became flesh! Our humanity is not something which comes between us and God. No, it is the means by which God is made known. “‘Destroy this temple [said Jesus], and I will raise it again in three days.’ But the temple he had spoken of was his body” (John 2:19, 21). Here is a new and exalted view of the human body, capable of hosting God’s own presence by the Spirit (something enjoyed by every believer – 1 Cor 6:19). “Do not despise the wonder within you” is an authentically Christian response to the body; a sense of awe and wonder at the mystery of humanness and its future.

The thought is probably derived from Basil the Great. See Owsei Temkin, *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991), 134, footnote 41.



Oliver O'Donovan,  
*Resurrection and Moral Order:  
An Outline for Evangelical  
Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos,  
1994), 14.

In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, the created order was both re-established and fulfilled. As Oliver O'Donovan put it, "it might have been possible... before Christ rose from the dead, for someone to wonder whether creation itself was a lost cause." Perhaps the only possible ending for the tragic story of a fallen creation is God's final judgment and destruction of the created order. But when Christ is born and raised as a physical human being, God proclaims his vote of confidence in the created order. In the resurrection of Christ, the physical creation is not overturned but subsumed, or caught up, into a greater and richer reality. In Jesus, the Second Adam, we see the pioneer; the blueprint for a new type of human being; the one in whose likeness a new creation will spring; the firstfruits of those who are to come (1 Cor 15:20).

*Clementine Homilies*,  
Homily 7, ch4.

The exalted view of the human body was translated by the church fathers into practical action. The *Clementine Homilies*, dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. state, "It is required of you to give honour to the image of God which is man, in these ways: food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, care to the sick, shelter to the stranger, and visiting him who is in prison, to help him as you can."

In response, Christians revolutionised the approach to the sick and dying, establishing distinctly dangerous places such as specialist hospitals for plague victims and leprosy sufferers. Even the word captures the ideal. It comes from the Latin *hospes*, meaning 'a guest'. A hospital is a place where we practice hospitality, neighbour-love to strangers; a concept which grows out of Christian concern for the body.

Perhaps we can see parallels between the church fathers' defence of Christian truth against ancient Gnosticism and our current battle against technological devaluing and demeaning of embodied humanity. I am struck that many thoughtful observers in our society have growing intuitions that the increasing emphasis on living digitally disembodied lives is unhealthy. People in our society have a deep sense of unease about the anti-human direction in which much technology seems to be heading. They sense that the "frictionless" utopia which the techno-optimists are working towards is not a place in which embodied human beings will flourish. But of all the philosophies and worldviews of our current age, uniquely, orthodox Christianity provides a theologically and philosophically robust explanation for *why* human embodiment matters.

Here is an internally coherent perspective from which we can defend, protect and celebrate the primacy and the goodness of human physical embodiment. Against the de-humanising determinism that some neuroscientific thinkers promote, the Christian faith points to the freedom that is inherent in our created personhood. Just as the persons of the triune God are free to give themselves to one another in love, so we as persons made in their image find freedom from all forms of determinism. "If the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

And our ultimate human destiny is not a Gnostic escape from physicality, nor the transcendence of our created human nature through technological enhancement. Rather it is the discovery of the astonishing glory of the physically incarnate Image of God, the Second Adam. This is our true human *telos*, the ultimate goal for which our humanity was created and redeemed, for “when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

As biblical Christians, the challenge we face is to find innovative and creative ways of using digital technology not to demean, distort or diminish us, but rather to enhance and protect our embodied nature as human persons, expressed in face-to-face relationships. Unexpectedly, the 2020-21 coronavirus pandemic illuminated many redemptive possibilities and opportunities for creative engagement with technology that were previously invisible. Yet we cannot ignore the destructive, de-humanising and ‘Gnostic’ tendencies which are also inevitably present as we spend more time in virtual interactions.

As we reflect on the possibilities that technology offers, we must ask how we can build a future in which physically embodied human beings can flourish, the vulnerable can be protected, and face-to-face embodied relationships can be celebrated and protected. And we should heed those words once more:

*“Do not despise the wonder within you.”*

## Questions for further thought and discussion

1. As John outlines, humans have been compared to monkeys, machines, and computer code. What are the effects of these analogies? Do they get worse as you move down the list? Why?
2. Grant Macaskill writes that “discussions are often closed prematurely with the accusation that science is ‘playing God’, a concept seldom discussed in relation to the rich ways in which humans are represented as being and acting like God.” If there is a sense in which scientists, and all of us, are called to play God (or image him) what will that mean for your engagement with technology? What are the life-giving or destructive ways in which we might do that?
3. What is the appeal and the danger of a quest for “frictionless” existence?

Macaskill, Grant.  
“Playing God or  
Participating in God?  
What Considerations Might  
the New Testament Bring  
to the Ethics of the  
Biotechnological Future?”  
*Studies in Christian  
Ethics* 32, (2019), 153.





# And Who is My Neighbour?

*The image of God  
and the exercise of power*





## MARK MEYNELL

is Director (Europe & Caribbean) for Langham Preaching. He formerly served in churches in Oxford, Sheffield, and London, and taught at a small seminary in Kampala, Uganda. He is the author of several books, and is currently co-editing a volume of essays on Christian Ministry and Power Abuse. Mark is married to Rachel and blogs at [markmeynell.net](http://markmeynell.net).

 @Quaerentia

**We know the episode well. A lawyer itches with questions for Jesus. He wants “to justify himself,” Luke tells us, so it is only natural to ask “What must I do?” (Luke 10:25, 29). Jesus replies: Love God; love your neighbour. But perhaps that was too open-ended for him. For all his affability and apparent curiosity, he needs lawyerly clarity and so asks: “And who is my neighbour?”**

Jesus’ reply, in the form of a legal case study, is nothing if not profoundly provocative. This is undoubtedly why the lawyer is left unwilling even to utter the despised word: ‘Samaritan’, as if his very ethnicity somehow renders him unworthy of neighbourly assistance. Or to be more accurate to Jesus’ narrative, as if the Samaritan’s ethnicity renders him unworthy of being a *model* of neighbourly love.

The lawyer’s second question is crucial for the topic at hand. For Jesus’ answer reveals that *all* people, regardless of race, skin colour, culture, sexuality, class, education, wealth, status, politics, are part of the neighbourhood. Every single person who shares in the *imago Dei* is to be loved as my neighbour.

Put like this, however, neighbourhood love seems unfeasible and unattainable. How is it even remotely practicable? To begin with, there are some basic considerations. Christian ethics will always emphasise both the gift *and* the demand of the gospel. In the face of our frequent lovelessness, we take refuge in Jesus’ encouragement that “What is impossible for man is possible for God” (Luke 18:26-27). Salvation is a gift. But we also remember that forgiven people are never exempted from the demands of gospel love. Jesus’ “Go and do likewise” remains (Luke 10:37). Put another way, we love because he first loved us. Yet, we need to go further and recognise the way in which power is a vital ingredient to that love.

The potential to wield power and authority is God-given, a crucial function derived from being created in God's image. We must never reduce the image to this or any other function, but loving well requires the careful exercise of power. But power is tricky to scrutinise at the best of times; and especially in the current climate. Four reasons for that are worth exploring.

## 1. Four Impediments... or why many evangelicals just don't (want to?) get it

### (I) THE LEGACY OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The Enlightenment granted pre-eminence to objective reason and thought, and thus to ideas and philosophy. But since Nietzsche and the twentieth century's unique horrors, all must now concede that truth claims are *never* neutral or objective. They are inescapably tied to the power wielded by their advocates. Failure to recognise that fact was an enlightenment blindspot. At the same time, the acid of scepticism that fuelled the Enlightenment's pursuit of truth and objectivity burnt through everything. It proceeded to corrode the knowability of truth itself.

The result is that, today, we are all now primed to assess not only the content of a person's truth claims but the apparent agendas behind them. So if someone in the West fifty years ago, say, started investigating Christianity, they might have asked "Is what these people believe true?" Today, they are more likely to ask, "Am I safe with this crowd?"

The issue for the church is that we are still thinking in Enlightenment terms about objective truth and share its blindspot for questions about power. It stunts our evangelism, because we patiently articulate what seem (to us, at any rate) supremely convincing arguments, while our interlocutors close their ears the moment they discerned our power privileges. But it also prevents us addressing issues of power within the church.

### (II) THE POLARISING EFFECTS OF THE DEBATE AROUND CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory is a broad movement but basically describes the view that culture is composed of power structures, resulting in privilege for some, oppression for others.

Taking its cue from Nietzsche, *critical theory* faces the harsh reality that nature is red in tooth and claw. The defining factor in human survival and coming out on top is simple. It is a matter not merely of accepting but embracing the necessity of the will to power. Where this has been impossible historically, so the narrative goes, it is now time, for the sake of justice, to bring transformation, to complete the revolution. This is about

empowering the voiceless and vulnerable, showing them kindness, and providing restitution for victims of injustice.

The debate concerning this movement inhibits careful engagement with issues of power in two respects. First, in some circles, mere mention of critical theory will be sufficient to increase temperatures and raise hackles. For example, Shenvi and Sawyer's 2019 piece for The Gospel Coalition is largely helpful and informative, but some will presume to restrict their engagement to gleaning the headline terminology and warding their people off with dog-whistle labels like "cultural Marxism."

Neil Shenvi & Pat Sawyer, 'The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity,' (15 May 2019), [thegospelcoalition.org](http://thegospelcoalition.org).

This is simply another way of referring to Critical Theory, although the reference to Marx provides more rhetorical punch.

But this dismissiveness and reductionism would be a mistake. As that article makes clear, the various schools of thought operating under the critical theory banner did not spontaneously emerge from the ether, nor do they lack any intellectual or experiential bases. There is undoubtedly truth in their analyses, without which it could never gain the traction it has, not least in those with long memories of oppression and abuse. That oppression – of non-white ethnicities, of women, of sexual minorities, of classes or political opponents – is a painful reality.

So there is the danger of dismissing the debates out of hand. But then there are serious flaws in critical theory which would make its wholesale embrace an equal and opposite mistake. At its worst, the approach identifies and blames power abuse as the cause of *every* social ill; its solution is to cast victims as therefore the only valid inheritors of power. Disputing that is then complex, with opponents routinely silenced by means of a humiliating exposure of vested interests fearing the loss of privilege.

But what then? What happens when former victims take charge? Will they differ from any other cohort in power? The monarchs and aristocrats were evidently not up to it; so we looked to the bourgeoisie; they failed, so it needed to be given to the workers; but the workers in power simply created a new aristocracy. And now we give it to oppressed minorities? Then what? Is it too much to expect that these formerly oppressed will resist the temptation to become oppressors?

Critical theory seems to have little to say about this, apart from self-destructive contests about victimhood trump cards. But the Bible does! It offers a political diagnosis that goes *far* deeper than critical theory ever has. For it underscores the reality of human sin and evil. Even



within our neighbours made in God's image. Even within ourselves. As Solzhenitsyn famously realised during his Gulag incarceration:



Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn,  
*The Gulag Archipelago,*  
1918-56: *An Experiment in*  
*Literary Investigation*  
(London: Harvill Press,  
2003), 312.

In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on the rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political orders either – but right through every human heart – through all human hearts... even in the best of all hearts, there remains... an uprooted small corner of evil.

This reality means our teaching may not duck the fact we are all perpetrators. At the same time, we must also teach about the reality of victimhood, regardless of its cultural currency. People *do* suffer at the hands of others, through no fault of their own, especially at the hands of the powerful. It is as simple as that. Every single one of us is both a perpetrator of personal sin and a victim of others' sin. There is such a thing as innocent suffering. To deny victimhood is to deny that fact, which is, after all, the central point of the book of Job. To deny it is to make a reductionism of our own. Furthermore, the denial of victimhood renders people vulnerable to the strongest advocates of critical theory, especially if their suffering was caused by preachers of the so-called "simple gospel."

### (III) THE INSECURITY OF PRIVILEGE

This is perhaps another subconscious reason for avoiding the power discussion. There is currently much talk of 'white privilege' and 'white supremacy.' This is not the place to engage that debate, but one thing is clear: those with privilege (of any sort) are often the last to recognise it as privilege.

We may not articulate it in such terms, but if we enjoy privilege, the real possibility of fearing its loss must be faced as a motivation. After all, even if you must share a privilege, it is no longer a privilege, is it? So we prefer ignorance and denial to facing the truth, especially if there is a risk of costly change.

### (IV) THE AVERSION OF A GENERATION?

The failings of forebears who wielded authority badly and even abusively can be paralysing. The media loves to expose hypocrisy (apart from its own, of course), and what is juicier than ecclesiastical examples? There

have been some horrendous stories in recent months in both the UK and USA, and so we recoil. It is tempting for a younger generation to think that authority itself is the problem and so to think there is safety in non-hierarchical or more relational networks. After all, we just want “to love people.” We take Lord Acton’s adage seriously – power corrupts so let’s avoid power. But societies which lack leaders and authority are anarchies that degenerate into survival of the strongest. It would be naïve, then, to think the issues of power will go away with the passing of older hierarchies and the invention of newer or looser structures.

Lord Acton famously said “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” in an 1887 letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton.

So, those are the barriers to a conversation about power. But where to go from here? Well, I want to reflect for a while on slavery. That extreme case, and the significance of the image of God in arguments for its abolition, will help us to reflect on all other abuses of power; abuses, as we’ll see, that are only different in degree, but not in kind, to the evil of slavery.

## 2. The Abolitionist’s Cause: Am I not a Brother?

On 12th May 1789, William Wilberforce rises to his feet in the House of Commons. First elected in 1780 at only twenty-one, he had dedicated the previous two years to investigating slavery, urged on by close friend and now prime minister, William Pitt. The challenge was formidable. The Commons was largely sceptical – not least because the Privy Council had commissioned a report into West African slaves’ conditions by a Liverpool delegate, Robert Norris. Among several claims, one deceit stood out as especially grotesque: slaves were somehow *better off* for their capture.

Wilberforce roundly condemned the Norris Report, accusing it of drawing “a film over the eyes, so thick that total blindness could do no more.” Armed with statistical details and eye-witness accounts, he carefully debunked each claim with new evidence and moral force. He spoke for four hours. Here are just a couple of excerpts:



When first I heard, Sir, of these iniquities, I considered them as exaggerations, and could not believe it possible, that men had determined to live by exerting themselves for the torture and misery of their fellow-creatures. I have taken great pains to make myself master of the subject, and can declare, that such scenes of barbarity are enough to rouse the indignation and horror of the most callous of mankind.

For this and all subsequent quotations from the 1789 speech: William Wilberforce, “Let Us Make a Reparation to Africa,” House of Commons, last modified 12 May 1789, accessed 1 Jul 2020, [emersonkent.com/speeches/abolition.htm](http://emersonkent.com/speeches/abolition.htm).

After itemising some appalling statistics from the ‘Middle Passage’ – the westward, Atlantic voyage which caused vast numbers of Africans to die – he concludes with evidence that slave mortality was almost entirely the consequence of their horrendous treatment rather than any culpable behaviour:



Here the Divine Doctrine is contradicted by the reverse action – That sympathy is the great source of humanity. ... As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, I confess to you sir, so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might, – let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.

Wilberforce's marathon marked a sea change and it was soon regarded as one of the greatest speeches Parliament ever witnessed. Yet because of the weight of financial, not to mention prejudiced, self-interest, the public square duel *for* the powerless *against* the privileged was now only picking up steam. It took eighteen years and multiple legislative attempts before the transatlantic trade was outlawed. Then, the abolition of slavery itself within British territories would require parliamentary slog for *another* twenty-seven years.

Notice Wilberforce's argument. Such treatment of human beings contradicted 'Divine Doctrine.' As fellow creatures, their createdness alone should be sufficient to elicit our 'sympathy [which] is the great source of humanity.' Of course, Wilberforce was by no means the only agitator for change. He was simply one of the most visible.

But what of the voices of those directly afflicted? Thankfully, there are *many* testimonies of those who escaped or were freed, on both sides of the Atlantic. Most famously, the letters of composer and actor Ignatius Sancho (published soon after his death in 1780) and Olaudah Equiano (also known as Gustavus Vassa, whose autobiography came out in 1789) have rarely gone out of print. Then a generation or so later, came the account of Mary Prince, published in 1831, in which she described her multiple sales to abusive owners and journeys from Bermuda to Britain via Antigua.

But one of the most powerful and compelling voices of all was that of Frederick Douglass. He left a remarkable legacy of speeches, letters and books. Here is but one example, from an open letter he published in his local press. It is both heartbreaking and infuriating that it was necessary.





Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip Sheldon Foner and Yuval Taylor, *The Library of Black America* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 261.

*A letter to the American slaves from those who have fled from American Slavery (The North Star - Sept 5 1850)*

*Afflicted and Beloved Brothers:*

*The meeting which sends you this letter, is a meeting of runaway slaves. We thought it well, that they, who had once suffered, as you still suffer, that they, who had once drunk of that bitterest of all bitter cups, which you are still compelled to drink of, should come together for the purpose of making a communication to you.*

*... Join no political party, which refuses to commit itself fully, openly, and heartfully, in its newspapers, meetings, and nominations, to the doctrine, that slavery is the grossest of all absurdities, as well as the guiltiest of all abominations, and that there can no more be a law for the enslavement of man, made in the image of God, than for the enslavement of God himself. ... Better die than insult yourself and insult every person of African blood, and insult your Maker, by contributing to elevate to civil office he who refuses to eat with you, to sit by your side in the House of Worship, or to let his children sit in the school by the side of your children.*

Again notice the nub of the argument. If we each bear the *imago Dei*, there is a givenness to human value, dignity and equality, and therefore rights. Without such a conviction, it is ultimately impossible to defend the dignity, let alone sanctity, of each person's individual life.

Slavery is, of course, a morally extreme, if *still* present, reality. The suggestion that it might be even remotely resonant with modern evangelicals in leadership will sound absurd. Yet, sadly, there are *some* parallels, especially since there is a spectrum of the ways in which power and authority are wielded. Which is where things get unsettling...

### 3. Handling Human Power: in whose interests is it wielded?

If the capacity for power over others and, relatedly, the authority that is derived from that, are indeed functional features of being created in God's image – part of the givenness of our nature – then there was evidently a divine purpose behind this gift. Elsewhere, we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves. So the question is not *whether* we use our power (as derived from personality and charisma, or privileges, or roles and job descriptions), but *how* we use power. I should add that this is a question for every believer, not just those with church titles or responsibilities, because it gets to the heart of how anybody treats anyone else.

Before I meet or engage with any other person, the starting point must be that each possesses the same unshakable dignity and honour as we do. At the same time, since that *imago* has been distorted and broken, such that every single one is tempted to sin and *is* sinful, we must assume each person has a capacity for evil. The paradox is that neither negates the other. Both are true. As Luther said, we are ‘*simul iustus et peccator*’ (at once a justified one and sinner), to which we might well add that we are ‘*simul creatus ad imaginem dei et peccator*’ (at once one created in the image of God and a sinner).

The implications for the life of a Christian community are tremendous, but we will restrict ourselves to two.

## (1) HUMAN POWER AND TRUTH

As a culture, we are now more attuned to the whiff of dark agendas than ever. We never take any statements at face value. The prevailing assumption is that *everybody* is hiding something. Arch-cynics will retort, ‘So what? Conceal away. Speak not to convince but to move; not to reason, but to cajole, manipulate, control!’

Yet for the follower of Christ, this is unconscionable. We know we should let our yes be ‘yes’, our no, ‘no.’ (Matt 5:37) We know that our convictions about the truth of Christ should automatically inspire a commitment to truthfulness like Christ. After all, what is a lie? It is a rejection of ‘true’ truth, of reality, certainly. But it is much more. It is an attempt to mould another person’s perception of reality to my own ends, which is in effect an attempt to gain power over another.

The German Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper unpacked this brilliantly in his 1974 essay *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power*. As one whose life spanned 20th century Germany – he was born in 1907 and died 1997 – he had observed this phenomenon. For it was the Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels who had declared “We do not talk to say something, but to obtain a certain effect.” Do you see it? It achieves power through the mere *illusion* of truthfulness. Yet, if I am encountering a neighbour, a fellow image-bearer, how is it even possible to justify such treatment?

Quoted in Mark Meynell,  
*A Wilderness of Mirrors:  
Trusting Again in a Cynical  
World* (Grand Rapids, MI:  
Zondervan, 2015). 46.



Josef Pieper, *Abuse of  
Language, Abuse of Power*  
(San Francisco, CA: Ignatius  
Press, 1992), 21.

Whoever speaks to another person – not simply, we presume, in spontaneous conversation, but using well-considered words, and whoever in so doing is explicitly not committed to the truth – whoever, in other words, is in this guided by something other than the truth – such a person, from that moment on, no longer considers the other as partner, as equal. In fact, he no longer respects the other as a human person. From that moment on, to be precise, all conversation ceases; all dialogue and all communication comes to an end. But what, then, is taking place?

Not considering the other as equal – but someone only useful, at best. He continues:



*Abuse of Language, 22.*

Rather, he has become for me an object to be manipulated, possibly to be dominated, to be handled and controlled. Thus the situation is just about the opposite of what it appears to be. It appears, especially to the one so flattered, as if a special respect would be paid, while in fact this is precisely *\*not\** the case. His dignity is ignored. I concentrate on his weaknesses and on those areas that may appeal to him – in order to manipulate him, to use him for my purposes... an *instrument of power*.

Finally:



*Abuse of Language, 32.*

This lesson in a nutshell says: the abuse of political power is fundamentally connected with the **sophistic** abuse of the word, indeed, finds in it the fertile soil in which to hide and grow and get ready, so much so that the latent potential of the totalitarian poison can be ascertained, as it were, by observing the symptom of the public abuse of language.

*Sophistic: using clever-sounding but false arguments.*

Sadly, what is true in politics is true in every other human sphere, including the church. How committed in practice are we to both truths about Christ *and* truthfulness like Christ? Or are we too quick to justify lying, or ‘half lies’? To accept a little ‘economy with the truth’? Perhaps to massage our own reputations or to protect the supposedly good name of our ministry? Or even to convince potential members that ‘our lot’ is a better bet than ‘that lot’?

The problem can be far more subtle than that, however. Consider the tendency towards instinctive, or even deliberate, reductionism. Imagine a heated debate is taking place in the wider church (when isn’t there?). It could be about anything really, but when it is especially contentious or complex, most pastors are likely to be deeply, and reasonably, concerned about church members heading down what seem to be blind alleys. Furthermore, on top of all the regular demands on a pastor, the temptation to use a quick-fix to save time and effort is great. We all know that a speedy, damning, and alarmist label will successfully deter perhaps nine out of ten members.

- ◆ “Oh, you’re resorting to that classic, *liberal* argument now, are you?” After all, who wants to end up in that camp?
- ◆ “Oh she’s gone all *social-gospel* with this race stuff. It’s a slippery slope, you know?” After all, nobody wants to end up slipping right out of the body and even becoming an enemy of the cross.



- ◆ “Yes, Fred has started saying X. And sadly, that surely reveals he’s no longer committed to scriptural authority.” That is a guaranteed clincher in some circles, and deployed with alarming ease.

It is all very easy when you know how. But if truth be told, it is disingenuous and deceptive. It uses language not for the sake of truth but for its effect. It may start with exhaustion and being over-stretched. We are too tired to battle on yet another front. Yet this does not alter what is happening.

The gains are usually only short term. Spin and propaganda invariably get exposed in time. But here is a privilege we rarely acknowledge. One of the most significant features of a Christian leader’s power is hidden. It is a phenomenon that occurs far more in churches than almost any other human organisations: we are trusted. This does not include what happens outside, since polls and surveys consistently reveal declining trust in clergy in Western culture. But inside? We will be readily believed, and so we are able to exploit that whether we acknowledge the fact or not. I vividly remember the first time it struck me with real force. The real shock, however, is that I was so slow on the uptake. Being on the preaching team at All Souls, Langham Place for nine years was a great, if daunting, privilege. Several years in, I walked up as usual into the pulpit and was suddenly stunned. Within a few seconds, almost a thousand people will sit in expectant silence for thirty or forty minutes, listening to my every word, taking notes and wrestling with ideas, ready and willing to put what I say into practice. What other contexts in modern life regularly allow for such rapt attention? Not many. This is astonishing power. So a time-saving reductionism thrown in will have quite the effect.

What are we implying about those we manipulate? Have they not become objects, rather than neighbours? We no longer consider them fellow *imago-Dei*-creatures. In our subconscious calculations they have ceased to be persons; they have become instruments. Just as our words have ceased to communicate truth; they have become tools. Ultimately, they become enslaved. This seems extreme, but only just. After all, Aristotle explicitly described slaves as “living tools”.

Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk 1:VIII.

The second implication will bring the connection to slavery into sharper focus.

## (II) HUMAN POWER AND FREEDOM

How do we relate to one another in community life? One writer who has had a profound effect on me in this area is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He did not engage with critical theory per se, but his insights in *Life Together* have vital applications to the power dynamics within our communities and churches.

The book reflects on the life of the short-lived learning community in Finkenwalde, Poland, between 1935-1937.

After a challenging section on the personal discipline of withholding sinful thoughts and guarding the tongue in community life, Bonhoeffer grounds his argument on the givenness of our creation.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (London: SCM, 2005), 71-72, my emphasis.

God did not make others as I would have made them. God did not give them to me so that I could dominate and control them, but so that I might find the Creator by means of them. Now other people, in the freedom with which they were created, become an occasion for me to rejoice, whereas before they were only a nuisance and trouble for me. God does not want me to mould others into the image that seems good to me, that is, into my own image. Instead, in *their freedom from me* God made other people in God's own image. I can never know in advance how God's image should appear in others. That image always takes on a completely new and unique form whose origin is found solely in God's free and sovereign act of creation. To me that form may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every person in the image of God's Son, the Crucified, and this image, likewise, certainly looked strange and ungodly to me before I grasped it.

This idea then gets picked up a few pages later.



*Life Together*, 78-79.

First of all, it is the *freedom of the other*... that is a burden to Christians. The freedom of the other goes against Christians' high opinions of themselves, and yet they must recognize it. Christians could rid themselves of this burden if they didn't release the other person but did violence to him, stamping him with their own image. But when Christians allow God to create God's own image in others, they allow others their own freedom. Thereby Christians themselves bear the burden of the freedom enjoyed by these other creatures of God. All that we mean by human nature, individuality, and talent is part of the other person's freedom – as are the other's weaknesses and peculiarities that so sorely try our patience, and everything that produces the plethora of clashes, differences, and arguments between me and the other. Here, bearing the burden of the other means tolerating the reality of the other's creation by God – affirming it, and in bearing with it, breaking through to delight in it.

As we consider how we need to heed this insight, it is important to identify the various ways by which a Christian leader's authority, for good and ill, is manifested:

- ◆ **Influence and Vision:** is it overt or is its effect on council or elders' meetings more subtle? Does it facilitate and inspire a sense of ownership and mutual growth? Whose vision is it, in fact? Is it God leading his people through the agency of the leaders he has placed there; or is it more a matter of what one or two leaders have decided 'on God's behalf'?
- ◆ **Preaching and Training:** is the pulpit a place of equipping and stretching, refreshing and inspiring? Does it both inform and transform disciples? Or is this a sphere of domination and thought control, especially when it comes to the demarcation of a narrow tribal identity? In other words, does it insist on a uniquely authoritative grasp on gospel truth while silencing dissent or doubt?
- ◆ **People and Teams:** some of the most egregious power abuses occur within leadership or staff teams. For an insecure leader, the freedom of the other is precisely where a threat lies, especially in situations of having to work closely together. How will they be aligned and work together? Is it partnership, albeit with differing roles (in which some necessary distinctions in authority are marked out), or is it a matter of curtailing others' freedom for the sake of the leader's freedom?

But I want to consider the area of discipleship, since it relates to all three of these. In some of the worst failings of recent years, it is in the aims, patterns and methods of discipling others, especially when there are significant age gaps, that the ground has proved fertile for abuse. It is also in the area of discipleship that the issue of liberty or enslavement emerge most clearly. To begin with it is worth considering the place of freedom in discipleship.

Although the notion of liberty was central to the Enlightenment, it is striking that nobody could ever fully agree on what that liberty was *for*. How should it be expressed? What was to happen when one person's pursuit of happiness resulted in another's endurance of misery? The right to pursue happiness is clearly one root for the modern individualism that cares little or nothing for the community. In contrast, the Scriptures never make this mistake. Humanity's redemption was never to result in a shapeless or subjective liberty. It was a freedom *from* slavery, certainly. But a careful reading of the Book of Exodus reveals a potent paradox. The people were freed *from* Egypt, but *for* the worship of Yahweh.

As was said in subsequent centuries, it is precisely in the service of Yahweh that we find perfect freedom, a context in which we truly flourish; where we can fully express what it was we were created to be. It is akin to a musician submitting to the ideal orchestral conductor, one who enables



playing at their very best, making the sum infinitely greater even than great individual parts. That is ultimately what being in God’s image leads to.

Notice how a person thus never loses their identity or individuality in the community (which is where communism leads). Nor does their inherent selfishness override the needs of that community (which is where libertarianism leads). This offers unity without oppressive uniformity; diversity without corrosive atomisation. As if that was not paradoxical enough, here is the greatest of them all, in the light of all we have considered. God’s community offers genuine freedom to serve without selfishness; slavery without the slightest hint of humiliation or dehumanisation.

How is that possible? Well it comes back again to the issue of *how* we use our power. God himself is to be our model for that. Here is Richard Middleton at the conclusion of his major work on the *imago Dei*.



J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 297.

Genesis 1 artfully shatters both ancient and contemporary rhetorical expectations and, instead, depicts God as a generous creator, sharing power with a variety of creatures (especially humanity), inviting them (and trusting them – at some risk) to participate in the creative (and historical) process. In Brueggemann’s summary, the picture of God in Genesis 1 and of humanity as *imago Dei* foregrounds “the creative use of power which invites, evokes and permits. There is nothing here of coercive or tyrannical power, either for God or for humankind.” Drawing both on the text’s rhetoric of God’s “gracious self-giving” as the model for human action and its protest against ancient Near Eastern views of human servitude, Brueggemann concludes: “The text is revolutionary.”

So here is our spectrum:

Effect of power	Enslaving	Constraining	Existing	Growing	Flourishing
Whose image?	<div><div>←</div><div><i>control</i></div><div><i>freedom</i></div><div>→</div></div> <div><i>forced to conform to the image or purpose of the ‘master’</i></div> <div><i>freed to express all the potential from being created in God’s image</i></div>				

Given that I possess power and authority, to what use should I put it? My own purposes or for the flourishing of another? The closer we get to the former, the more it enslaves the other. It gravitates towards a relationship of control and coercion. That other person has ceased to be my neighbour; he or she has become an instrument or tool to possess and use.

Yet, here's the rub. As a Christian leader, my longing is for people to grow in holiness, while my temptation is to avoid the hard, slow graft of ministry and take short cuts. That will mean I begin to justify any means in that work. I easily exaggerate the extent to which it lies in my power to transform somebody. And so I begin to think of them as someone to be acted upon. Even if it means abusing my power by which I curtail my neighbour's freedom. In other words, I limit their freedom to have agency and responsibility for their own lives.

I think this is one of the worst things about the John Smyth horrors which started coming to light in the national media in recent years. He deliberately targeted young and impressionable boys and then inflicted grotesque punishments on them in the name of Christian discipline and sanctification. This happened not just in the UK but also in Zimbabwe. They were manipulated and controlled. How was such activity not identified and ended? The answer in part is because of the guile and deception of abusers: they tend to be masters of concealment and threats.

Christian summer camps for pupils from elite boarding schools. John Smyth was chair of the Iwerne Trust between 1974 and 1981.

Yet it must also be said that he was able to hide within distortions that grew within the culture of Iwerne camps. I should say that I personally gained much from Iwerne camps and was a leader for seven years (despite never having gone as a teenager). I am thankful to God for all I gained there, not least in the deep Christian friendships that I still value to this day. I should also say that in recent years, significant rather than token changes were made to the network's culture. Smyth was before my time and I only learned his name when it reached the front pages, and, having learned more about him, there is little doubt that Smyth was an extreme outlier; his appalling activities were truly monstrous, especially because they clearly influenced others to act in similar ways.

C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (London: Harper, 1949).

Nevertheless, at its worst, there was a culture of what C. S. Lewis famously articulated as the 'Inner Ring.' In part because of the deliberate mission of reaching students from the 'top schools' and around the more magnetic personalities in the leaders' room, there was a sense of being elite and set apart. Most importantly, there were some unspoken, unhealthy and even controlling discipleship methods, which is what made Smyth's extremes less discernible. Too often, a fatal boundary was crossed by a number, though they were by no means in the majority. In discipling someone, usually one far younger and more impressionable, a mentor would act not simply as a fellow pilgrim, offering wisdom as one a little further along in the Christian road. He effectively took on responsibility for that person's progress and holiness. He presumed to exercise a role, normally exclusive to the Holy Spirit, to bring about transformation.

For example, he might well discern arrogance in the young believer. That is certainly common enough! But *then*, the mentor assumes the role of sanctifier. This is not to exclude the place for a gentle challenge or even rebuke. Their effectiveness or expediency will often depend on factors such as the quality of trust between the pair, the mentor's ownership

of his or her own sin, the younger believer's teachability and honesty. However, there is a fine line between a divinely appointed challenge and bringing someone "down a peg or two." Some of the tried and tested means included playing squash or tennis with the sole aim of resounding victory; or employing a harsh word or sarcastic put-down in a team meeting; or giving a deliberate cold shoulder for a period "until he learned his lesson." There will no doubt be various pastoral justifications for such treatment. Yet in the light of Bonhoeffer's insights, the 'freedom of the other' has been trampled in actions that have already degenerated into control. Such manipulations are hardly healthy for *either* party.

Henri Nouwen was remarkably astute about how ministry goes wrong in these directions and how these temptations suggest a deeper problem:



Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 60.

One thing is clear to me: the temptations of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.

If correct, and **Chuck DeGroat's more recent study** clearly indicates that he is, then the antidote to such behaviour will necessitate a long and painful road of self-discovery and confession at the very least. It is a problem as far from the realms of the quick-fix that it is possible to be. What we can say for certain is that these problems force us to recognise afresh the profound transformation that our Lord Jesus Christ's revolution demands of us. He walked the path of powerlessness despite, or even because of, his power. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, yet adopted the degradation and invisibility of the slave. Weakness has never looked so potent.

Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020).



Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 63.

Powerlessness and humility in the spiritual life do not refer to people who have no spine and who let everyone else make decisions for them. They refer to people who are so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides them, always trusting that, with him, they will find life and find it abundantly.

## 4. Acid Tests: Some diagnostic questions

I will close with a barrage of diagnostic questions to help us discern where we might unwittingly be crossing lines or lazily exploiting our privileges.

- ◆ Who are the weak and strong/powerful outside our church communities? Do these demographic groups feature in our church? If so, are the power dynamics the same within



and without? In other words, perhaps the neighbourhood includes affluent yuppie types, alongside those with more menial social roles, such as shop keepers, council workers, cleaners, those often from immigrant or deprived backgrounds. If this social range is represented church, do they function in the same kinds of roles? Are the yuppies the only ones in leadership as elders or on the parish council? Is there any sense that the people regarded by the world as inferior are especially treasured and valued, not just because they clean the toilets faithfully and well but because everybody has something to learn about Christ through and from them? We're part of a body. Every part matters (especially those parts that the world treats as embarrassing or somehow shameful, 1 Cor 12:21-25). All are neighbours.

- ◆ How do questioners and doubters fare? Is there a limit to how they're handled or tolerated? Or do they know they are truly welcome, even if they perhaps need to pick better moments for their questions? Does the preaching help them or does it assume everything in the Christian life is 'sorted' and straightforward? Can the leaders be questioned? Publicly? Or is that crossing a line?
- ◆ How is humour used? Is it a sarcasm used to keep people in their place or differentiate insiders from outsiders? Is it used to divide and conquer or to bring lightness and joy?
- ◆ When it comes to the disciplines of the Christian life and those who lead the charge on church discipline, is there an acceptance of 'the freedom of the other' or is it more honoured in the breach, whereby behaviours are patrolled without leeway for conscience, differences of opinion or struggles? Is it determined by just one person or a small group? Are these questions ever publicly discussed? By which I do not mean public discussion of an individual case (unless there are safeguarding concerns, naturally); rather, an airing of the general issues and how these might be tackled.
- ◆ How are church ministry strategies decided? Obviously no fellowship can do everything. We all have to focus and prioritise. However, how are the criteria decided? Is there any point at which these criteria are merely worldly? Are we just valuing those that the world values and so seek to do ministry with them? For surely, if we have learned nothing else from all this, one thing is clear: there can be no limits or boundaries to my neighbourhood. Certainly not the boundaries of race and colour, wealth and status,

education and privilege. All are made in the image of God. Which surely means, there is *no such thing* as a strategic person. How can there be? At least not in a way that we can discern. God undoubtedly has his plans and purposes, but who are we to know precisely what they are until long after the moment?

So whenever I encounter an individual person, I must acknowledge and embrace the fact that, *without exception*, each one is my neighbour.

### Questions for further thought and discussion

1. Mark wrote that ‘if someone in the West fifty years ago, say, started investigating Christianity, they might have asked “Is what these people believe true?” Today, they are more likely to ask, “Am I safe with this crowd?”’ Does that ring true? What implications would that have for how we evangelise and communicate the truth of the gospel?
2. “The question is not whether we use our power (as derived from personality and charisma, or privileges, or roles and job descriptions), but how we use power.” In light of this, how would you begin to assess your own exercise of power? In light of all Mark says, what would be wise and open ways of doing that?
3. What would parenting, friendship, or church leadership look like if we better grasped people’s right and proper “freedom from me”?
4. Don’t skip Mark’s diagnostic questions at the end of his article. They would be a great way to reflect on the culture of a church or Christian ministry.



# Safe Spaces

*What does a  
pastoral response  
to abortion  
look like?*

In this issue we have thought about what it means to honour the image of God in human beings. In this final piece we turn to the painful and sensitive subject of abortion.

The aim here is to equip churches and their leaders to love their neighbours affected by this issue (inside and outside the church) and to begin exploring what that might look like.



## ANDREW NICHOLLS

qualified as a doctor in the 90s before entering into theological training and then full-time paid ministry in 2003. A pastor for 15 years, he helped to found a crisis pregnancy centre ([optionslondon.org](http://optionslondon.org)) and remains a trustee. Now at Oak Hill College as Director of Pastoral Care, Andrew is married to Hilary, and they have two teenage children.

 @andrewnohairs

### Andrew, could you sketch for us your own background and experience as it relates to abortion?

I trained as a doctor, qualifying in 1992. At the time I was still unclear about how the Bible spoke into this area. I thought in general terms about compassion towards those with unplanned pregnancy, and that a compassionate response could include abortion, and I have seen a number of abortions performed. The STOP (Suction Termination Of Pregnancy) list was a regular way for medical students to get some experience. I never

performed one, but I was involved with them. I probably saw a few tens of such abortions. The sucking, the sieving to check for parts, the disposal. All done by excellent medical colleagues to the highest standards of care and professionalism. I rarely got to talk to the women concerned. And I have since changed my mind about the best ways to show compassion to a woman with an unwanted pregnancy. My mind changed for just one reason – the plain teaching of Scripture, as shared with me by Christian medics in the Christian Medical Fellowship.

Until then, I think I had my head in the sand, I think lots of us do that. It is comforting to hide from reality, and I guess ostriches are frightened so they find a safe place to put their head. It's scary to start to think straight about all this because, as soon as we do, it becomes clear we need to respond.

### We don't have space to go into depth here about biblical material, but as you've worked hard to summarise biblical teaching, how would you do that? And then places to go for more in depth material?

I've often used four headings:

#### 1. The unborn child is created by God

John 1:3 – “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” Like everything else that exists, the unborn child is not ours. First and foremost they belong to Jesus. The thought that it is “our baby” is only ever a secondary truth; primarily they always belong to the one who created them and entrusted them to parents who will embrace or neglect that trust to some degree.

#### 2. The unborn child is human

We could talk about Ps 139:13 (David knit together in the womb) or the prophets and apostles set apart from the womb (Isa 49:1, Jer 1:5, Gal 1:15). But there is also the example of Christ himself.

Talking to Mary, the angel said she would conceive and give birth to a son (Luke 1:31). Note that – Mary will not just give birth to

The phrase “unborn child” – implying their full humanity – will be justified under point 2. I use it here for consistency, and because the technical label of “fetus” or “embryo” can be used to reject the conclusion for which I am arguing – that the unborn child is exactly that, a child at an earlier stage of development, and unborn.



a son but she will *conceive* a son. Of course Scripture wants to highlight the way in which that is a miraculous conception and a unique child. But the miracle in view is that God the Son drew near and took upon himself a human nature, and a human life began. At conception. In this way (and many others) Jesus was “fully human in every way” (Heb 2:17).

### 3. The unborn child is unique

There are two passages which display God’s particular care to demonstrate that the unique human beings we know after birth are present before birth. Ante-natal life is not some generic proto-human life that becomes unique and individual only at birth.

In Genesis 25, Rebekah’s pregnancy becomes unusually uncomfortable, and “she went to enquire of the LORD. The LORD said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,

and two peoples from within you will be separated;

one people will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger.” (Gen 25:22-23)

So the LORD’s own explanation for that ante-natal jostling, is that two nations (represented by the twins) are already living out their post-natal battles. Jacob and Esau - and in them all their descendants - are fully present; literally alive and kicking.

In Luke 1, we have a similar example. Mary visits pregnant Elizabeth and her baby “leaped”. Elizabeth “was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed ‘...the baby in my womb leaped for joy.’” John the Baptist, says the Holy Spirit, is (remarkably, but truly) already beginning his life’s

work of heralding the Messiah. Without question, if Elizabeth had miscarried, John the Baptist would have been lost to the world. He was unique, the Spirit-enabled forerunner to Jesus.

This is a beautiful truth to rejoice in, but it also speaks to moments of deep grief and helps account for them. For example, in an attempt to comfort a grieving mother after miscarriage, it is sometimes said, that she “can have another one.” But she can’t. A fetus lost is not just fully human – we may be confident they are already a *unique* human being. There is nothing replaceable about them.

### 4. The unborn child is weak

God expects his people to reflect his care for the weak. Psalm 88:2-4 is typical in calling Israel to “defend the cause of the weak and fatherless.” Since an unborn baby is human, they are the weakest there is – voiceless and unrecognised. That is to say, a pregnant woman represents two human neighbours God calls us to love.

Other relevant Bible references include Psalm 139:13-16, Psalm 22:10, Jeremiah 1:4-5. Exodus 21:22-25 has been controversial in Christian thinking but in my view strongly affirms the human status of the unborn child and is well treated by John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 720. See also the resources list below and Oliver O’Donovan’s *The Christian and the Unborn Child* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1975).

**Many of us might need some introduction to the statistics and scale of what we’re talking about. What should we know here?**

Because we talk so little about it, many people imagine abortion is fairly rare. If this has been our assumption until now, it

is one we must immediately abandon. One in three women has an abortion. One in three. 24% of pregnancies end in abortion. Nearly one quarter of all pregnancies. Every church member should know these facts, carry them in their heart and grieve. Words like holocaust are not exaggerations but attempts to find adequate words. We sacrifice children on a truly epic scale in our hospitals. 207,384 in England and Wales in 2019.

98% of all abortions are entirely normal babies. 98% of abortions are done on demand. 99% are paid for by the NHS, costing well over £100,000,000. Every year.

To this we might add that about 170,000 are lost in processes of IVF every year. The same biblical material asks us to unpick this number also and conclude that these also are human deaths at our hand.

### **What are the implications then for how we disciple and teach the church?**

The church must know this is happening, and they will only hear it from us. We must let them see their neighbours, and help them obey Jesus' command to love them. It might help to list out who our neighbours are, so that we have them more clearly in view.

- As we've been arguing, there are the unborn, whether their life began as an unwanted pregnancy, a pregnancy after unwanted sex, or in an IVF clinic.
- The 1 in 3 women who have had an abortion. Those who know it was wrong, and are troubled by guilt, and those who don't know it was wrong.
- Fathers whose child was aborted, with or without their knowledge. And fathers who coerced or compelled their partner to abort their baby.

- Couples facing infertility (true for 1 in 7 couples).
- Women or couples experiencing miscarriages.
- Couples choosing contraception methods.
- Teenagers as they become fertile.

These neighbours (and more) are present in the church and in the world. In the church, therefore, we need to teach on the status of the unborn child. Every church member needs to know the basic biblical material and will be helped to know the basic statistics. Crucially, they also need to know about two cornerstones of the Christian life. First, *grace*. We need to imagine a church where someone could both hear that abortion is wrong and know that they are safe, whatever they have done. In part this is about how we communicate, but it is also about the culture of a church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about how churches all too easily become pious fellowships which permit "no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners." That sense that I need to fix a smile on, even if we've had a blazing row in the car on the way to church. By contrast, we need to celebrate God's grace and demonstrate how every one of us finds comfort in it. We need to be able to arrive at church saying "I'm a mess and I really hope there's something for me from Jesus today because I really need it."

Then, we need to cultivate *contentment* instead of asserting our rights before God. I wonder if there isn't sometimes a sense of entitlement around our expectations of family. The thought that having children is a blessing and so God is obliged to back us in that quest, wherever it takes us. I am not saying it is wrong to seek the Lord with our heart's desires, but we do need to learn

*Life Together*,  
(London: SCM,  
2015), 86.

to trust God's goodness in what he gives us, and seek to honour him in a broken world, even in those corners of our lives where things feel most broken.

So those would be some church-wide comments. More specifically, in light of those statistics I mentioned, we need to make sure that these issues are addressed in the different ministries of the church. Whatever men's or women's ministries you run in your church, it is worth asking how these issues could be helpfully addressed in them. Likewise, we need to talk to our teens about godliness in this area, about forgiveness, and equip them to live amongst their peers who will be sexually active and having abortions. However we prepare couples for marriage or support them in their marriages, we need to help them know about forgiveness and cleansing for past sins, and to know how to wrestle with infertility, contraception, and miscarriage. How to pray, what to ask of God, how to grieve and wait and trust. I'm not sure we help by keeping a pregnancy a secret for 12 weeks because that can leave people very lonely and unsure what to do if a miscarriage happens. And then for those who have sinned in the area of abortion, they need to know that the gospel is for them, specifically and in detail, and that there is time and space to talk.

People in our churches need to hear these things from their God-given leaders. Negatively – no one else is likely to tell them – it is on you and those you discover in the church who can do this! You are probably going to have a find a Sunday sermon for this, at least one, with some regularity. It is not a week where you stop preaching the gospel, it is a week where you preach the gospel into one of the most urgent, widespread and yet hidden issues of our day.

Positively – they will listen to you – they rightly trust you to tell them what is

important so as you bring them God's word on this, in the power of the Spirit you will be shining brilliant light for them to see the world and themselves and Jesus more clearly!

Furthermore, if we are right that a mistaken sense of entitlement before a holy Creator drives some of our thinking about reproduction, infertility, marriage, and family life, as well as in many other areas of discipleship, we have countless opportunities to address these wider issues in our preaching. Any passage that touches on the majesty of God, the sovereignty of God, the grace of God, the love of God or our responses of faith and trust could potentially be applied in the direction of trusting God that he has given me what is good, infinitely more than I deserve, that I lack nothing, and can depend on him to give me anything I need for what he asks me to do. Many situations in life are deeply painful, and some can be fixed, but not all can be fixed in ways pleasing to him. We must take care that we don't turn from him in order to get what he has not given us in his perfect love and care. A five minute section in a sermon developing this thought and naming infertility or marital status or family size alongside, for example, the more traditional money, sex, and power could be rich and needed food.

### **What does a biblical and compassionate response to the world look like?**

We must evangelise it, for our sin is very great and we all deserve eternal condemnation in hell outside of Christ. God hates child sacrifice; Ps 106 identifies that it draws God out in just wrath against those who perpetrate it. And so we are called to invade the nation that does this – our own – with the sword of the Spirit in prayerful, loving, passionate, intelligent, winsome, extraordinary evangelism. We must share Christ with everyone!

Evangelism must always be our chief response, but never our only response. Just as a starving child we love needs both food if they will eat it and the gospel if they will listen, so an unborn child and its mother need both loving care in their weakness if they will receive it, and the gospel if they will hear it. Loving our neighbours demands this.

Wilberforce and his 'Sect' were heroes of evangelism *and* heroes of the abolition of slavery. They did good in both ways, and we are rightly proud of both. Yet we seem strangely, horribly reluctant to follow his example. Who among us can see, in our day as he saw in his, that there is again a cause so urgent in the name of brotherly love that we must give our life and breath until it be won?

Strikingly, his campaign swung public opinion by showing pictures of slavery and slaves. Wedgwood's medallions (left) and slave ship diagrams forced the reality into public consciousness as no words had done. There was a power in images that horrified. It makes me wonder whether we have too quickly dismissed those who hold colour posters of aborted fetuses in our faces in the shopping centre as narrow fundamentalists? I think some of them are among our most consistently compassionate heroes. They know the truth and they cannot bear the killing of one quarter of our babies without trying to wake us up.

Learning the abolitionist lessons would also involve praying for those in government, and encouraging Christians into politics and advocacy. Christians and churches have also been partnering to open pregnancy crisis centres. They reflect a concerted effort to love our neighbours. There are a range of approaches amongst

them; some are careful to be non-directive but to highlight options, others provide more directive advice. I'm the trustee of one in Wimbledon called *Options*. John Wyatt (who wrote another article in this issue) has been a steadfast advocate on these issues for years and is involved with *Choices* in Islington. In Newcastle, there is the Tyneside Pregnancy Advice Centre, and there are plans for more. These centres provide wonderful opportunities to talk with pregnant women who we might never otherwise meet and post-abortion women who are seeking counselling. You might also have opportunities to go into schools and highlight the work and you might have the opportunity to share the gospel in sensitive ways. Of course it can feel like a mountain to climb, but our experience is that you discover that God has placed in our churches people who are wonderfully gifted in just these ways; people who have never enjoyed serving Jesus as much as they have sharing his compassion in this way.



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## RESOURCES

### Books

Dr Lizzie Ling and Vaughan Roberts, *Talking Points: Abortion* (Epsom: Good Book Company, 2020).

John Wyatt, *Matters of Life and Death* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009).

Jason Roach and Philippa Taylor, *Facing Infertility: Guidance for Christian Couples Considering IVF* (Christian Medical Fellowship, 2014).

### DVD

Biology of Prenatal Development  
[ehd.org/products\\_bpd\\_dvd.php](http://ehd.org/products_bpd_dvd.php)



### Mobile Apps

EHD

[ehd.org/see-baby-pregnancy-guide.php](http://ehd.org/see-baby-pregnancy-guide.php)

### Websites

#### On Abortion

[brephos.org](http://brephos.org)

#### On contraception

[cmf.org.uk/resources/publications/content/?context=article&id=26815](http://cmf.org.uk/resources/publications/content/?context=article&id=26815)

CMF podcast

[buzzsprout.com/437878/1401964-ethical-contraception](http://buzzsprout.com/437878/1401964-ethical-contraception)

### Sex Education

[lovewise.org.uk](http://lovewise.org.uk)

### Miscarriage

[miscarriageassociation.org.uk](http://miscarriageassociation.org.uk)

[tommys.org](http://tommys.org)

[thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-things-god-is-teaching-us-through-miscarriage](http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-things-god-is-teaching-us-through-miscarriage)

### Pregnancy Centres

[optionslondon.org](http://optionslondon.org)

[choicesislondon.org](http://choicesislondon.org)

[tyneside-pregnancy.org.uk](http://tyneside-pregnancy.org.uk)

## Questions for further thought and discussion

1. Why are grace and contentment foundational to how we approach this issue?
2. What changes might be needed in the life of your church to embrace both of those more fully?
3. What do you think accounts for how little evangelicals in general speak about abortion?
4. Has God used this article to challenge you to act in some way? What would be the next prayer, conversation to have, or action to take?

In the next issue...

PRIMER

*"The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this truth of the Incarnation."*

Jim Packer, *Knowing God*

In Issue 12 we will be exploring that fantastic truth. We'll see why the church came to confess Jesus Christ as truly God and truly man; one person, with two natures.

We'll explore how that emerges from the Gospels and why it is so vital for our salvation. And we'll let this staggering thought sink in as we reflect on how God has come near to us in his Son.



With contributions from Ralph Cunningham, Greg Lanier, Chris Stead, Nathan Weston, and Garry Williams, Issue 12 will be available in October 2021.

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*Bottle* (p24) by Auckland Museum (CC BY-SA 4.0) and label edited



In this issue we explore the doctrine of humanity with help from Sarah Allen, Mark Meynell, Andrew Nicholls, David Shaw, Stephen Williams, John Wyatt, and something old from Friedrich Nietzsche.

noun | 'pri-mer

1. a textbook or introduction to a subject
2. a material used to prepare a surface for further treatment
3. a device or compound used to ignite an explosive charge

*Primer* is designed to help church leaders engage with the kind of theology the church needs, to chew it over together, and to train up others.

Published twice a year, each issue of *Primer* takes one big area of theology and lays a foundation. We look at how people are talking about the doctrine today, and what good resources are available. We dig out some treasures from church history to help us wrap our heads around the big ideas. We focus on what difference the truth makes to the way we live life and serve the church.

There is space to make notes – and we hereby give you permission to underline, highlight, and scribble at will. There are also questions at the end of each article to stimulate discussion and take things further.

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