

# WORLD-VIEW FOUNDATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

How do you see things? Why is there something rather than nothing? How do you explain human nature? What happens to a person at death? How do you determine what is right and wrong? How do you know that you know? What is the meaning of history?

Most people would have their own answers to these questions. Their answers will have a profound effect on how they operate in the world and on the kind of society they wish to live in. One word you could use to describe the framework they use to come up with these answers is 'world-view'. In other words, thinking about someone's world-view is another way of thinking about what makes someone tick.

The world-views of individuals also play out into our culture – its films, television, music, magazines and newspapers, government, schools and universities, and the practice of art and science; all are affected by world-views. After watching a play, we might be able to pick out the world-view of the playwright, after reading a paper, get a sense of the world-view of the journalist and his editor. Some world-views become so prevalent and important that they seem to leave a mark on a whole discipline, or indeed a whole culture. In other words, they become 'dominant world-views'.

Different writers use a range of definitions to explain the term. For example, James Sire states: 'A world-view is a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world' (*The Universe Next Door*, pp.17). Phillips and Brown argue that 'A world-view is, first of all, an explanation and interpretation of the world and second, an application of this view to life. In simpler terms, our world-view is a view of the world and a view for the world' (*Making Sense of Your World*, pp.32). Walsh and Middleton state that 'A world-view provides a model of the world which guides its adherents in the world' (*The Transforming Vision*, pp.32). All these

definitions point in a similar direction. Simply put, a world-view describes a way of seeing or interpreting everything and acting accordingly.

If a person wears tinted blue spectacles, the world around will appear blue. Similarly, if a person views life through the lens of atheism (the view that there is no God), he or she will view and live in the world differently from someone who views the world through the lens of pantheism (the view that everything is part of God). World-views, like spectacles, usually go unnoticed (at least to the wearer). The key point, however, is that no-one has a neutral or transparent world-view. The Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, notes that 'Even the relativist (who believes that everybody's point of view on everything is equally valid even though apparently incompatible) is obedient to an underlying story about reality which comes into explicit conflict with most other stories, which speak of reality as in the last analysis a seamless web, open in principle to experience and discussion' (*The New Testament People of God*, pp.41). Wright says we should break world-views down in the following way:

1. World-views provide the stories through which human beings view reality. Our way of seeing the world is a story that answers fundamental questions to do with existence, identity and the future;
2. These stories can give answers (even if they are wrong ones) to the big 'meaning of life' questions: Who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? What's the solution?
3. The stories that express the world-view, and the answers that it provides to the questions of identity, environment, evil and eschatology (the issues around the end of time), are expressed in cultural symbols (festivals, family gatherings and the like);
4. World-views include praxis, a way of living and being in the world. World-views necessarily entail action: 'If you think like that, you live like this.' Again, the real shape of someone's world-view can (or should) often be seen in the way someone lives.

Interestingly, Tom Wright notes that world-views are profoundly theological, regardless of whether or not they contain an explicit or worked out view of a god-figure. The reason for this is that world-views deal with the 'ultimate concerns' of human beings, namely issues of life and death. The implication is that journalist Polly Toynbee, zoologist Richard Dawkins, historian David Starkey and TV presenter Jonathan Miller (*Brief History of Disbelief*) all have profoundly theological world-views, even though (or perhaps especially because) they 'evangelistically' deny the existence of God.

## **WORLD-VIEWS: WHERE ARE WE NOW?**

The last few centuries (a period of history commonly referred to as modernity), saw the rise of the atheistic, secular world-view: regarding God, some people have said that such a thing does not exist (atheism); regarding the world that, since God does not exist, it must have come to be without the agency of a 'higher being'; and regarding the human race that we have evolved through natural processes from primordial biological organisms, again without the agency of any kind of higher being.

Meanwhile, the period of modernity witnessed an unprecedented optimism of human beings to learn about and exercise control over the world, and to banish 'ignorance' and 'irrationality' from human society. Religion, or more specifically the institutional churches, was often seen as part of the problem. It was during this period and particularly after the French Revolution that the political notion of secularism – the view that religious conviction should be excluded from the public square – became increasingly influential. In spite of what is now widely recognised as the breakdown of modernity into 'post-modernity' (widespread scepticism about the values of modernity), atheistic secularism still represents a powerful, and deeply political, world-view.

One proponent of this view is Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University and author of *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*. Professor Dawkins, a committed evangelist for the atheist cause (hardly a 'neutral' scientist at all), argues that 'Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy are part of the charm of childhood. So is God. Some of us grow out of all three.'

The atheistic secular world-view could look like this:

Q. Who are we?

A. We are Homo sapiens, a product of evolution. Species change over time. The organisms best adapted to their environment are able to reproduce and pass on their traits to the next generation, while less adapted organisms don't reproduce as much or at all. This is also known as survival of the fittest, and this is how human life came into being. It evolved from other life forms and is evolving into other life forms. There is no supernatural being intervening to help or hinder us.

Q. Where are we?

A. We live in this world, which has been formed by gravitational forces in a cosmos that came into being through the 'big bang'. Randomly, the right conditions for life existed on this planet (and, in a nearly-infinite universe, probably exist somewhere else too!).

Q. What's wrong?

A. Some unpleasant things, for example, war, famine and poverty, are caused or made worse by human greed and folly. Others, like illness, floods or earthquakes, may have natural causes or happen by chance, just because the world is the way it is, but they too may be caused or made worse by human actions. Human irrationality is also a problem – it means we make decisions that are not based on the evidence.

Q. What's the solution?

A. To try and live as rationally as possible, without 'superstitious' belief. We should try to live full and happy lives ourselves and, as part of this, make it easier for other people to do the same. For some, however, it would be rational simply to be 'the fittest' and dominate others.

These answers given above clearly raise some very interesting questions. For example, in a world without God, what is the criterion for 'living life to the full', the 'good' life or even rationality? CS Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, notes that 'The human mind has no more power of inventing a new [moral] value than of imagining a new primary colour' (pp. 56). Using the example of being willing to die for a good cause, Lewis argues that (without God) a refusal to 'sacrifice oneself is no more rational than a consent to do so. And no less rational. Neither choice is rational – or irrational – at all' (pp. 23).

Today's dominant, secularist world-view tends to be uncritically accepted and promoted – in schools, universities, the media and government circles. In the light of this, the need to develop a Christian world-view is an urgent one. Let's first consider the basic Christian answers to the four questions – who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? What's the solution? In other words, how does the world look through the lens of a biblical world-view?

### **CHRISTIANITY – A WORLD-VIEW**

It's easy to be disorientated by the world-view(s) of our culture and unthinkingly absorb its values and outlook: Reductionism, relativism, consumerism, commercialism and materialism – all children of atheism – are powerful, cultural norms in the Western world. Christians have often been accepting of these norms, and thus have been outflanked by atheism. Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, in *How Now Shall We Live*, (Marshall Pickering, London, 1999) write:

'The church's singular failure in recent decades has been a failure to see Christianity as a life system, or world-view, which governs every area of existence. This failure has been

crippling in many ways. For one thing, we cannot answer the questions our children bring home from school, so we are incapable of preparing them for the challenges they face. For ourselves, we cannot explain to our friends and neighbours why we believe, and we often cannot defend our faith. And we do not know how to organise our lives correctly, allowing our choices to be shaped by the world around us. What's more, by failing to see Christian truth in every aspect of life, we miss great depths of beauty and meaning: the thrill of seeing God's splendour in the intricacies of nature or hearing his voice in the performance of a great symphony or detecting character in the harmony of a well-ordered community.'

The apostle Paul writes: 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will' (Romans 12.2). In his letter, Paul firmly challenges his readers not to be conditioned by the dominant world-view and values of their Greco-Roman culture but, instead, to be renewed in their thinking by God's Spirit. Elsewhere, Paul writes: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2.16).

So how would a Christian answer our four questions? What is a Christian world-view, and in what ways does it conflict with the atheistic world-view, or indeed other world-views?

Q. Who are we?

A. We are unique human beings, created in the image of God, to know him and live under him.

Q. Where are we?

A. We are living on Planet Earth, the place God created for us to live, enjoy and look after.

Q. What's wrong?

A. We are not enjoying the truly human life God created us to experience. We have rejected God and are unhappy. We thought that a world without God would be a happier place but as societies move away from God, they don't get happier, they get unhappier; they don't become more loving, they turn more selfish.

Q. What's the solution?

A. God must act again and give us a way of returning to him. God must take the initiative and give us a fresh start, and we must acknowledge this new way of living. The message

of the Gospel is that God has indeed acted again and given all people the opportunity of a fresh start. The only qualification is commitment to Jesus and his message.

If this is the world-view we ascribe to, the implications for our views on a range of issues, and the way we live in the world, are enormous.

### **UPSIDE DOWN VALUES?**

The values and world-view of Jesus and his kingdom message are radically different from the dominant values evident in the majority of the affluent West today.

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, said that all human actions were driven by sex. In his view, sex was the dominant, motivating power in the world. Consider contemporary culture and it would appear he was right.

Existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, emphasised the desire for power as the driving motivator in the world. One brief glance at Western culture would indicate that, like Freud, he had a point. Indeed, in sex crimes such as rape, the desire to exert power and dominance over another is usually as significant as anything else. Or perhaps they were both right?

In contrast, Jesus preached love and service – a radically different, seemingly counter-intuitive doctrine. Jesus said 'I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22.27). 'For he who is least among you all – he is the greatest' (Luke 9.48). 'If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' (Luke 9.23).

So Jesus said, and powerfully demonstrated, that it was not the love of power that changes the world but, rather, the power of sacrificial love.

### **FURTHER READING**

Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live*, Marshall Pickering, 1999.

NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 2) - NT Wright brilliantly surveys the field of Jesus scholarship in the twentieth century, presenting Jesus firmly within the political and social setting of the first century Jesus who sees himself as a representative both of God and of Israel, one who is seen as releasing Israel from exile and the power of her enemies (spiritual and temporal) and 'reconstructing Israel around himself'.

NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1), SPCK, 1992.

In his excellent book, *The Universe Next Door* (IVP 1976), James Sire outlines the most influential world-views of the past and present. These are Christian Theism, Deism, Naturalism, Nihilism, Existentialism, Eastern Pantheism, and New Age or New Consciousness.

W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World*, Moody Press, 1991.

Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, Inter Varsity, 1984.

### **SOME QUOTES**

'World-views are the lenses through which a society looks at the world, the grid upon which are plotted the multiple experiences of life.' (NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*)

'I'm an atheist, and that's it. I believe there's nothing we can know except that we should be kind to each other and do what we can for other people.' Katherine Hepburn

'Beliefs are what divide people. Doubt unites them.' Sir Peter Ustinov

'It is not hardness of heart or evil passions that drive certain individuals to atheism, but rather a scrupulous intellectual honesty.' Steve Allen

'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that we are without excuse.' The apostle Paul (Romans 1.20)

# 1 WHO ARE WE?

*In the previous section, we introduced the concept of 'world-view', describing how important and influential they are in how human beings understand reality and so how they choose to live. We noted that 'World-views are the lenses through which a society looks at the world, the grid upon which are plotted the multiple experiences of life' (NT Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, pp.138) and that world-views answer four ultimate questions to do with existence, identity and future: Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? What is the solution?*

*In this section, our focus is on the first of these questions, 'Who are we?'*

## **BANG**

How do you think our world came about? Most scientists speculate that the universe began with a 'big bang' – a hugely energetic explosion at a point of infinitesimal size and infinite mass. The Earth is just one corner of that huge, still-expanding universe: space dust pulled together by the gravitational force of the sun over billions of years. The theory isn't proven and, as all natural science, doesn't tackle the really big questions that would follow: how, and why, has life – specifically human life – developed on this tiny cosmic backwater?

In 1859, after a five-year voyage to the islands of the Pacific, British naturalist Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* and put forward what is now widely known as the 'theory of evolution'. The book succeeded in popularising certain ideas about how species developed and presented a strong challenge to some popular religious answers to the same questions.

Darwin is often presented as an atheist (in other words, starting from the view that there is nothing like God). His own world-view was, in fact, confused – so much so that on the question of the existence and nature of God he admitted to being in a 'muddle'. But prominent atheists of the time seized on the opportunity to, as they saw it, put a final nail in the coffin of the theistic world-view. Humanist orator, Robert Green Ingersol, wrote of Darwin in 1880, 'His doctrine of evolution, his doctrine of survival of the fittest, his doctrine of the origin of species, has removed in every thinking mind the last vestige of orthodox Christianity.'

So the theory of evolution was, almost from its moment of conception, co-opted into a world-view eager to make its case against the Christianity of the day. Darwin's science, good or bad, is still being used to promote the world-view of atheism today: on Earth, the right physical conditions have arisen for carbon-based life to be possible, beginning with a 'primordial soup' of increasingly complex organic molecules and inorganic salts which

developed into amino acids and then nucleic acids. Certain organisms adapted to their environment and were able to reproduce and pass on their traits to the next generation. Millions of years of evolution by the process of natural selection (which continues even now) 'happened' to produce *Homo sapiens*, human beings, just one species amongst the many and various species that exist and have existed. You are one individual of our species, here because your parents conceived you, so you needn't turn to God to answer the question of how you got here.

In fact, Darwin himself noted that 'The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?' (From a letter to W Graham, 3 July, 1881, quoted in *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters*.) There are some difficult questions waiting in the wings for the atheist.

### **ATHEISM AND ETHICS**

In December 1999, John Lennon's song *Imagine* was voted song of the millennium. Lennon believed that a world without God would be a happier place: 'nothing to kill or die for, no religion too, imagine all the people living life in peace....' Was he right?

How do you go about making good decisions in life? What kind of things do you take into account? You may never have thought very deeply about this and just do whatever seems best at the time. But, if you think really hard, your answers to the question 'What should I do?' (there are other ways to put this question – philosophers throughout history have used the question 'What is the good life?') very often relates in a special way to your answer to the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Who are we?' To use a superficial example, if I insanely believed myself to be a king, I might spend a lot of time dressing up in purple costumes, wearing a crown, ordering people around and behaving in other ways I considered to be kingly. Our ethics (the word we use to describe the whole gamut of questions about how it's right to behave) grow naturally out of our world-view.

Once we know the answer to the first world-view question 'Who are we?' the ethical picture (which may only become complete once we know the answers to all four questions) begins to emerge. Let's look at the example of the atheist who, after Darwin, believes that human beings got here by evolution and reckons, because he's pretty certain of the method of our getting here (sometimes he'll say something like 'It's scientific fact' or 'It's proven') feels comfortable with his starting point that there's no God. In passing, notice that the world-view, like many others, is in danger of becoming 'closed' because it only ever takes account of things that fit in it already and anyway. Perhaps sometimes we need to let other thoughts in to test out our world-views and make sure that they don't just fall apart when

we try and apply them to how the world seems to work. So, if human beings are the product of cosmic chance – similar to other species, just more highly evolved – then how should we live and, crucially (most questions in ethics relate to how we treat other people) what responsibility do we have to other members of our own species? Can atheism give us any satisfactory answers to this question?

It would take a long time to say everything that any atheist has ever said about these questions – there have been some very creative and helpful answers, and it's only fair to note that suspicion about religious world-views often grew out of a sense that they didn't give wholly satisfactory answers to these same questions. Here are a few of the things that atheists have said about ethics:

1. **Greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarianism).** As humans without God, our purpose is to be happy. We should pursue our own happiness, and set conditions together that help us all to reach the same goal (if we all acted in a purely selfish way, we would eventually undo each other's happiness). This seems at first a very practical way of working, but there are some serious problems – how do we know what is good? How do we arbitrate when something seems good to one person that another thinks is bad? Situations also arise that seem to go against our conscience – situations where the greatest good for the greatest number leaves some small number very severely disadvantaged. Nevertheless, many people have held this view and lived this way and it is still a very popular response to the ethical questions.
2. **There are ways of making hard and fast rules without God (moral imperatives).** We should only ever act in a way that we would choose for others to act. So, it's wrong to lie because, generally speaking, we would want people to tell us the truth. In a way, this is very much like some things that religious people have said (Jesus of Nazareth said something very similar to this and Christians promote that view to this day). In its favour, this view seems to express the convictions of many people. In different places throughout history and, particularly in the last century, people have come to rely on human rights as a way of articulating our commitment to others.

The question is why is it so consistent with theistic ethics of the past? Some people say that, in fact, you still need external ideas of goodness and rightness to make this ethical system work. Why should I adopt these imperatives if I can bypass them and behave exactly as I want, to my own advantage? So, in the end, can the atheist solve this without theistic commitments? Enlightenment

philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said that for him to abandon his belief in God would be the same as abandoning his sense of morality.

3. **Ethical rules are produced by the biological processes of evolution (socio-biological ethics).** The logic of evolutionary metaphor in the field of ethics is that survival and evolutionary progress are good and everything else is bad. The human commitment to ethical behaviour is, if anything, a factor of natural selection. In other words, we are 'tricked' by our genes into thinking that there are certain ways of behaving that are better than others because these ways of behaving have become important to our biological interests. If we ceased to believe in external moralities, we would cease to behave in ways that our evolutionary progress demands. What this idea ignores is that we humans often believe that the highest forms of ethical behaviour are those which totally deny vested interest. It can also lead very quickly into the thinking of racial superiority - Hitler wrote that mating between different races is 'contrary to the will of Nature for the higher breeding of all life' – and eventually to 'moral nihilism'.
  
4. **Behaving ethically is meaningless – honest exercise of power is the true business of humanity (moral nihilism).** In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche wrote, 'The strong men, the masters, regain the pure conscience of a beast of prey; monsters filled with joy, they can return from a fearful succession of murder, arson, rape and torture with the same joy in their hearts, the same contentment in their souls as if they had indulged in some students' rag'. In *The Antichrist*: 'Pity crosses the law of development, which is the law of selection. It preserves what is ripe for destruction: it defends those who have been disinherited and condemned by life ... The weak and the failures shall perish: first principle of our love of man. And they shall be given every possible assistance. What is more harmful than any vice? Active pity for all failures and all the weak: Christianity.'

There isn't a supreme being; there isn't any external, moral accountability. The final logic of no God is that everything is indeed permissible - what should restrain us? Utility is a fabrication, Kant's imperatives are theism on the sly, and those things we thought to be good – compassion, equality and a sense of justice – stand on their heads and turn into evils. Of course, most atheists are rigidly moral people of one kind or another, but nonetheless this world-view's evolutionary explanation of who we are lends itself to the most incredible ethical reverses.

## **GOD IS THE BASIS OF HUMAN UNIQUENESS**

For a moment, forget everything you think you know about what Christians believe about creation, or what you think the gaps of the Genesis account are. Instead, what if it is best read as presenting a radically alternative world-view?

The biblical creation story can be seen as a polemic that challenges dominant ancient assumptions about the nature of God, the world and humanity. The biblical story engages with ancient Near Eastern culture but it is supremely relevant today. It provides an outline account of *who* did *what*, without the detail of *when*, *where* or *how*. In other words, we see that the 'how' of the Big Bang or Darwin's theories doesn't necessarily conflict with theism as a world-view, although atheists will continue to claim that they do.

The biblical creation story acknowledges the existence of one supreme Creator God over and against the polytheistic world-views of the time. The account strikes up a powerful and resolute note right at the start by declaring 'In the beginning God...' Soon, God is revealed through his creative actions. God is seen to be all-powerful, not impotent like some of the ancient gods; ordered, not impulsive; good, not exploitative. In particular, the writer insists that the sun, moon, stars and sea monsters – powerful deities in ancient Near Eastern theology – are *merely created beings*. Indeed, the sun and moon, spoken into existence by God, are simply 'the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night' (Genesis 1.16). It is difficult for us, in the twenty-first century, to appreciate what a shocking statement this was in the second millennium BC. To argue, however, for human uniqueness on the basis of a creator God, as opposed to an evolutionary paradigm, is similarly subversive today.

The biblical creation story has a higher view of human beings in the created order than that given us either in the ancient Near Eastern or in recent secular alternatives. In the creation myths of the Near East, the gods created human beings as an afterthought in order to supply them with food. In the biblical story, the situation could not be more different. Human beings represent the climax of creation. It is only then that the world, 'good' up until that point (Genesis 1.24), can be described as 'very good' (Genesis 1.31). God's concern for human well-being is unmistakable. In Genesis 1, instead of man providing the gods with food, God gives man plants to eat. In Genesis 2, God creates man, provides him with a garden to enjoy, animals for companions, and last of all, a wife.

Clearly, human beings are totally different from the biblical creator God. He is eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-present, whereas humans are physical and finite. Theologian Karl Barth, for example, stated that an infinite qualitative difference exists between God and humanity. In short, God is 'wholly other'. Barth argued that humanity cannot reach God by philosophy, theology, science or nature. It all comes down to God's action toward

us, on behalf of us; his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Despite this, it is clear that human beings are also similar to God in some aspects. For, God 'created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' (Genesis 1.27). In essence, to be human, therefore, is to be created in the 'image' or 'likeness' of the true and living God. The question is what does this mean?

### **RELATIONAL BEINGS**

God created human beings to relate to him and each other. Contrary to the emphasis on independence and human autonomy in contemporary culture, the biblical emphasis is on human relationships and interdependency. To be outside of relationship, either with God or other human beings is to be less than human. God's human creatures reflect his image, as male and female, in community. In relating to others who are similar but dissimilar, human beings can reflect the likeness of a relational God who is one, but also an eternal trinity, Father, Son and Spirit. To be in the 'image of God', therefore, is to be a relational being. To be human is to love and be loved.

### **FREE BEINGS**

Secondly, human beings are free beings. God has created humans with the ability to choose between right and wrong, good and evil. In the creation story, 'God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'" (Genesis 1:15-17) Adam had freewill – but our ability to take decisions confers not only privileges but also responsibilities on us.

### **RESPONSIBLE BEINGS**

Linked to our human ontology (who we are) is our human function (what we do). In the Bible God says 'Let them [human beings] rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground' (Genesis 1:26). Since the beginning, God's intention has been that his unique human creatures should look after Planet Earth as his representatives, reflecting his glory. Our human task is to do this by relating rightly to God and one another. This can be summed up in terms of love of God and neighbour. The *Shorter Westminster Catechism* nicely expresses this: 'Q: What is the chief end of man? A: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever'. The implications of this are very significant and affect everything from individual choices to social policy, ecology, business and politics.

### **THE STRENGTH TO BE HUMAN**

In summary, then, according to the Bible, human beings are uniquely created in the 'image of God'. Our humanness is based on this fact alone; to be human is to be special. The

extent to which we are in a right relationship with God and each other determines the extent to which we are truly human. God's human creatures are responsible and accountable to their creator, each other and the whole of creation.

Unfortunately, the evidence of broken relationships is everywhere to be seen. The image of God is a distorted one in all of us. The question *What's wrong?* will be considered in the section after next.

### QUESTIONS

If being human means being in the image of God, when can life be said to begin and end?

What are the implications of this for disabled people, the unborn and the world's poor?

What are the public policy implications of understanding human beings as relational creatures?

### QUOTATIONS

'DNA in chimpanzees differs from our own by less than one percent. This worries geneticists, who would have expected a far bigger difference to account for the enormous dissimilarity between the two species.' (Francis Hitching, *The Neck of the Giraffe*, Meridian Books, 1982, pp.57)

'Your true identity is as a child of God. This is the identity you have to accept. Once you have claimed it and settled in it, you can live in a world that gives you much joy as well as pain. You can receive the praise as well as the blame that comes to you as an opportunity for strengthening your basic identity, because the identity that makes you free is anchored beyond all human praise and blame. You belong to God, and it is as a child of God that you are sent into the world.' (Henri JM Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, Doubleday, 1997, pp.59)

'To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no-one, not even an animal. Wrap it up carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness ... The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is hell.' (CS Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Harcourt 1960)

'Blessed are you, Lord God, our light and our salvation; to you be glory and praise for ever. From the beginning you have created all things and all your works echo the silent music of your praise. In the fullness of time you made us in your image, the crown of all creation.'

You give us breath and speech, that with angels and archangels and all the powers of heaven we may find a voice to sing your praise.' (Eucharistic Prayer)

#### **FURTHER READING**

CS Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, Fount, 1997.

Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Harper and Row, 1981.

Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge, 1993.

NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, SPCK, 1996.

NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1997.

Tom Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, SPCK, 2000.

Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Duckworth, 1985.

#### **WEB LINKS**

[www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk) - British Humanist Association

[www.relationshipsfoundation.org](http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org) - Relationships Foundation: Building Relationships in Public and Private Life

## 2 WHERE ARE WE?

*In the previous section, the major world-view question of 'Who are we?' was explored. For Christians, to be human is to be created in the 'image of God', and from it we infer that humans are relational, free and responsible beings. In this section, we consider the second in the series of ultimate questions: Where are we?*

For many scientists the Big Bang theory is the best current explanation of how the universe began. Everything started with a hugely energetic explosion at a point of infinitesimal size and infinite mass. Since then, the universe (and time, for that matter) has been rushing outward, propelled by the energy of that explosion. Billions of years ago, the gravitational forces around our sun started to pull space debris together creating planets and ... well, here we are. For some these mechanisms, this order, and the sheer expanse of the universe invite a sense of a wonderful, creative mind. Others think that, having understood it (they may be overconfident here, it doesn't take a great mind to ask the kind of question which the story doesn't easily answer), they can safely conclude that the theory covers everything we need to know on the subject. The answer to where we are is planet Earth, the fifth biggest planet in our solar system, third in distance and 93 million miles from the Sun. In fact, you might also think that given the size of the universe there must be dozens of planets like our own – planets that have the right conditions to sustain life. So we're probably not even unique.

The *Where am I?* question may seem simple, but the answer to it profoundly affects our understanding of both *who* we are and *how* we live.

### **WHERE DO ATHEISTS LIVE?**

We are on Earth, one planet in the universe that began with the Big Bang. Earth was created from space dust, pulled together by gravity after the universe started with a huge explosion. The conditions necessary for our living here came about by chance (as opposed to the creative acts of a supreme being). It's the cosmic platform on which we live our lives.

If this is where we are, planet Earth is a neutral mass of land and water, neither good nor evil, at best scientifically interesting. The Earth's ability to sustain life will diminish over time – perhaps when the sun gets too hot – and that will be the end of it. Until then, we can 'eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die'.

### **WHERE DO CHRISTIANS LIVE?**

We are in a good and beautiful, though fallen, world, the creation of the God in whose image we are made. It's not just the cosmic stage on which we play our lives, but we are

also intimately involved and strangely responsible for it and for all the other creatures that inhabit it.

Within this view, the world suddenly starts to look and feel very different. Again, we need to stop thinking so much about whether the world was created in six days or in four billion years and instead try to think about what the Judaeo-Christian account of creation means for our world-view. Its significance requires unpacking, not just because it is God-centred (and so clashes head-on with atheism, including ideas about meaning and purpose), but because it contradicts many other accounts of what the Earth is and why it is as it is.

### **GNOSTICISM**

Gnosticism refers to a religious and philosophical movement that originated in the first or second century AD. At its core, the movement emphasises a claim to special knowledge (*gnosis*, knowledge). It also has a commitment to a radical 'anti-cosmic dualism' in which all that is material - the world and the body - is seen as evil and as the creation of a lesser god.

Christianity rejects this view. The biblical creation account claims that God created the heavens and the earth. The writer states that 'God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness' (Genesis 1.3-4). God is good and he created the universe good, not neutral and certainly not evil. Starting during the third day, the writer ends the description of each day by noting that 'God saw that it was good', i.e. not merely nice to look at but morally good. It is only after creating human beings at the end of creation that 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good' (Genesis 1.31). The whole of creation, not only human life, powerfully declares the existence of a purposeful creator and reflects his glory (Psalm 19.1; Romans 1.19-20).

From a biblical angle, the world is not as the Gnostic imagines. The apostle Paul opposed the world-view when he argued that 'in [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1.15-17).

### **PANTHEISM**

The pantheist equates God with the cosmos; God is everything and everything is God. God is the ultimate reality of matter and spirit through being and/or becoming all things that have been, are, and will be. Pantheists seek God both within themselves and within the entire universe. They believe that God is manifestly everywhere from the germinating bulb in the ground to an exploding volcano or rushing river.

Although New Age spirituality is increasingly popular, worship of the natural world, especially planets, was a greater temptation in the ancient world than it is today. Rejecting this view, the biblical account describes the *creation* of the sun, moon and stars in greater detail than anything else except human beings. The fullness of the description suggests that the creation of the heavenly bodies held a special significance for the author. Gordon J Wenham notes that ‘In the neighbouring cultures [of the ancient Near East], the sun and the moon were some of the most important gods in the pantheon, and the stars were often credited with controlling human destiny.’

The biblical account, however, implies that the universe is important, but not all-important. God is the principal actor who summons the universe into being, including the sun, moon and stars: they are creatures, not gods. They are demoted from the role of deity with influence over people’s lives. Gordon Wenham notes that ‘with creatureliness goes transience; unlike the Hittite sun-god, they are not “from eternity” ‘.

If God is more than the sum total of the universe, there is more to life than life on Earth. Our world-view should enable us to look beyond this temporal world to eternity. Jesus said ‘Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell’ (Matthew 10.28). In a letter directed to people enduring unprecedented persecution, the Book of Revelation points towards the promise of a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21).

## **DEISM**

Deism is the opposite of pantheism. Derived from the Latin word ‘Deus’ (God), it refers to a belief in the existence of God that is based strictly on the use of logic, common sense and reason. Deists reject the idea of revelation. They argue that God set the universe in motion like a clock but does not interfere with how it runs. Deism was especially influential in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Pantheism and Deism represent two extremes. One argues that God is everything; the other that God set the universe in motion but has since left the scene. Pantheism correlates with the biblical world-view in asserting that God is manifestly everywhere (‘in him we live and breathe and have our being’) but differs in equating the Creator with the created. Deism – Christians would argue – is right to reject the view that ‘God is everything and everything is God’ but wrong to claim that God has ceased to be involved in world affairs.

The biblical perspective is that creation is dependent on God’s sustaining power. Creation would not exist independently from God, apart from his sovereign control. In Colossians,

the apostle Paul notes that 'In him all things hold together' (Colossians 1.17). Hebrews states that 'He upholds all things by the word of His power' (Hebrews 1.3).

### **IS GREENNESS NEXT TO GODLINESS?**

According to the biblical world-view, the 'image of God' status enjoyed by human beings confers special responsibilities on us. Winston Churchill noted that 'The price of greatness is responsibility.' The biblical creation account notes that after creating human beings God commanded them to "Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.' And it was so.' (Genesis 1.28-30)

If our world exists primarily for human benefit rather than being an expression of the glory of God, then caring for it is above all a factor of human self-interest. The task has no legitimacy or meaning on its own. Environmentally-conscious Christians, on the other hand, will care for creation because they love the God who brought it into being –no additional justification in relation to humanity is needed. As Christopher Wright has put it, 'Creation care is a fundamental dimension of our humanity, not an optional dimension of our Christianity. In this, as in so much else, to be Christian is to be called to be more human ...'

Our ethical picture continues to build. Understanding of where we are should inspire us and spur us into action - involvement in and active care of the world. Tragically, proponents of a Christian world-view have not always acknowledged its ecological and environmental implications. In a speech on 5 July 2004, the Archbishop of Canterbury announced that the Church of England was to embark on a green reformation. Williams outlined the Church's growing commitment to green causes and argued that humans should not see themselves as having 'dominion' over the earth; instead they are its stewards. Clergy have been asked to discourage cremation because of the greenhouse gases generated, to drive around in electric cars and to urge congregations to wear extra layers of clothing to save on heating.

### **QUESTIONS**

The term 'world-view' not only refers to a way of *seeing* the world but a way of *being* in the world. What are the practical implications of believing that a) the universe was created good, b) the universe reflects God but is not God, and c) God actively sustains life today?

## QUOTATIONS

'If we find the answer to [why it is that we and the universe exist], it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason - for then we would know the mind of God.' (Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam Books, 1988)

'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.' (The Apostles' Creed)

'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.' (Psalm 19.1-4)

## FURTHER READING

John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Revised Edition), SCM Press Ltd, 1979.

Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, Bantam Press, 1995.

Tony Lane, *The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought*, Lion, 1996.

NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1997.

James Jones, *Jesus and the Earth*, SPCK, 2003.

Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, IVP 2004.

## WEB LINKS

A Rocha: <http://en.arocha.org/home/> - International conservation organisation working to care for God's world

[www.bbc.co.uk/climatechange](http://www.bbc.co.uk/climatechange) – take part in a worldwide climate change experiment

### 3 WHAT'S WRONG?

*In the last section we examined the major world-view question of, 'Where are we?' we noted that human beings inhabit a good and beautiful world, the creation of the true and living God in whose image we are made. In this section, our focus shifts to the third (and potentially the trickiest) in the series of ultimate questions: What's wrong?*

*This is where Christians have some tough questions to face – if the world is so good and beautiful, then what has happened to it? Often, our Earth and our lives seem not so much characterised by their goodness but by their frustrations and limitations. For those of us in the affluent West, this 'wrongness' comes through most clearly in our work, our relationships and, above all, in the way in which we all persistently tend to make bad decisions. We can't ignore the fact that there are people who will have an experience of the world that will be profoundly cruel and unhappy – entire nations wracked by the effect of natural disaster, lives blighted by disease, famine or political oppression. So why is everything like this?*

*In fact, this is a question to which the entire Christian world-view gives an answer – and a solution.*

#### **IS THE WORLD EVIL?**

In March 2006 Slobodan Milosevic died in detention at the Hague tribunal, a few months before his trial for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia reached its climax. Among his alleged crimes was the infamous massacre at Srebrenica. While the international community looked on, Serbian forces under his command killed 8,100 men.

How can such acts be explained, understood, or even talked about? Only the language of 'good' and 'evil' seems to suffice. But, as we discussed in Session 1, using that thinking and that language in the modern world is becoming increasingly difficult; the moral objectivity needed to make the case for things being truly evil or truly good is probably only available to people with a theistic world-view. What would Nietzsche's nihilism have made of Srebrenica or the genocide in Rwanda? Nothing, because human beings have come to 'see beyond good and evil'. In fact, Nietzsche concluded that, without God, there can logically be no good or evil, no moral values, no moral facts. A world without God is a world where we can afford to be ambivalent, even affirming, of evil action and indifferent to the suffering which results. In Nietzsche's words 'Is not the world much colder?'

Proponents of various world-views, even theistic ones, tend to get panicky when evil comes into the conversation. For those who believe in a good God, it's a huge metaphysical problem, but for those who believe in no god at all, the flat challenge is how

to account for and deal with wrong actions, or how to be anything other than ambivalent. History suggests that these problems will not be solved easily. Some theists who aren't Christians might suggest that, paradoxically, evil is fundamentally good in the sense that it provides us with a God-given opportunity to show how good we really are. Equally, some atheists are known for laying the problem of evil at the door of irrational 'religionists', who divide the world with their 'non-scientific', 'fundamentalist' beliefs.

### **THE LOVE CHILD OF PANTHEISM AND ATHEISM**

Our society is newly struggling with the question of evil – how to understand it, talk about it and resolve it. The Twin Tower attacks on 11 September 2001 and South Asian tsunami on 26 December 2004 are recent examples of how evil forced itself back on the agenda. For around 200 years, our culture has been trying to answer the question, 'What's the problem?' with 'We haven't advanced enough yet'. Theologian NT Wright puts it like this:

'This belief in progress, which you find in poets such as Keats, was in the air in the pantheism of the Romantic Movement, and was given an enormous boost by the popularization of Charles Darwin's ideas and their application to fields considerably more diverse than the study of birds and mammals. The heady combination of technological achievement, medical advances, Romantic pantheism, Hegelian progressive Idealism, and social Darwinism created a climate of thought in which, to this day, a great many people, not least in public life, have lived and moved. The world is improving! It's our article of faith. Things are getting better. Evil is on the decline. Progress is winning. This belief in progress has received many challenges, but has remarkably survived, and flourishes. The First World War shook the old liberal idealism; Auschwitz shattered the idea of Western civilization as a place of nobility, virtue, and humanizing reason. Yet, despite everything, people still suppose that the world is basically a good place, and that its problems are more or less soluble by technology, education, 'development' in the sense of 'Westernization,' and the application or imposition of Western democracy and capitalism.'

In the scheme of things, violence, hatred, cruelty, enmity, lust, pain (even death?) are all hanging over from the past. Belief in progress implies that, as they get along with things, humans will become more reasonable, rational and amenable and will also be able to meet the challenges of our world in a more technologically sound and effective way. Tsunamis? Better install an early warning system! The problem is, it just doesn't stick. In the twenty-first century a small group of men with virtually no weapons or political influence are able to wreak havoc at the centre of the most powerful nation on Earth, killing thousands of people. Technological and social advances, in some cases, end up exacerbating, rather than solving, problems and bringing on new evils. Our cultured progress is the fantasy of

atheism's and pantheism's lovechild – the 'enlightenment' view of history.

### **THE CHRISTIAN ACCOUNT OF EVIL**

The Christian world-view gives a very distinctive if incomplete account of evil (perhaps it is one of its defining features that it disorders and confounds attempts to pin it down), but the biblical writings say a lot about it.

One of the first things that happen in the story of God's good creation is that his people – those he had created with special responsibility for the earth and each other – go against his will. They do so at the instigation of an evil agency, but nonetheless knowingly and willingly. Evil has infected the world – human society immediately breaks down, as the good creation and relationships are spoilt.

Since the fall, God's relationship with his creation has been marred. In the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, he writes that 'since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator.' (Romans 1.20–26)

In biblical theology, there is a strong view that the fall has impacted the whole cosmos, not simply human beings, thus helping to explain the existence of some 'natural disasters'. Paul notes that 'creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay'; it is, he says, 'groaning' as it awaits its redemption. God's creation is not as it should be (Romans 8.28).

The pattern of the first fall has been repeated in human history ever since. In the Bible, the Israelites repeatedly rebelled against him and normalised sin. Instead of experiencing God's peace and wholeness, they experienced his judgement in the form of exile (593–563 BC). The prophet Ezekiel was commanded by God to prophesy against the Israelites in stark terms: 'And you will know that I am the LORD, for you have not followed my decrees or kept my laws but have conformed to the standards of the nations around you.' (Ezekiel 11.12)

So what's wrong? Evil has entered and infected every part of our world, particularly human hearts. We are not enjoying the truly human life God created us to experience. We have rejected God and are unhappy. We thought that a world without God would be a happier

place but as societies move away from God, they don't get happier, they get unhappier; they don't get more loving, they get more selfish.

### **QUESTIONS**

Are well-behaved robots better than ill-behaved free agents?

If human beings are fallen creatures, what are the implications for the role and size of the state?

### **QUOTATIONS**

'The Son suffers death in our God-forsakenness, the Father suffers the death of his beloved Son and the Spirit binds the other two together through unspoken sighs.' Jürgen Moltmann, *The Triune God: Rich in Relationships*.

'Seeing much, suffering much, and studying much, are the three pillars of learning.'  
(Benjamin Disraeli)

'To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering, one must not love. But then, one suffers from not loving. Therefore, to love is to suffer; not to love is to suffer; to suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love. To be happy, then, is to suffer, but suffering makes one unhappy. Therefore, to be happy, one must love or love to suffer or suffer from too much happiness.'  
(Woody Allen)

### **FURTHER READING**

CS Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, Fount, 1998.

CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Fount, 2002.

Juergen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ As the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, SCM Press, 1974.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Parable of the Madman*, 1882.

## 4 WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

*In the last session, we examined the difficult world-view question of What's wrong? It was noted that, although created 'good', God's human creatures quickly rebelled against him, thus spoiling their relationship, leading to alienation and despair. In rejecting God, human beings turned their backs on their true humanity and the special dignity inferred by that status. Finally, we can turn our attention to the last in the series of ultimate questions: What's the solution? In the end, it's the most important question of all.*

### WORLD-VIEW SOLUTIONS

So far in our survey of world-views, we have mostly concentrated on atheism and everything it carries with it. To generalise, the atheist's world-view is that humans are highly evolved mammals who happen to exist by chance on a planet that came about when gravitational forces pulled together enough space dust. There are different ways in which the atheist interprets the significance of human existence – some become entirely cynical of human purpose, others develop a more positive humanism. Those that do see the world in an ethical way might say that the problem of human existence is that we are not advanced and compassionate enough – we have not appreciated the evidence, and so make poor decisions. Belief in God, they maintain, is very much part of the problem; it is a source of conflict and oppression.

For the atheist it is hard to say that there is an ethical problem as such. Many would be uncomfortable using words like 'good' and 'evil' (because of their religious connotations) but many also would continue to maintain a strong sense of what they believe to be good. If there is no problem, then we don't really need to find a solution. If, on the other hand, there is a problem – and it would be hard to argue that there wasn't – then it is a consequence of irrationality and probably intellectual backwardness. Given time, rational debate and the proper regard to human rights, these things will resolve themselves. Those atheists, therefore, who are convinced that education, understanding, science and technology have the potential to solve human problems, are keen to eradicate those things which put this grand project at risk – belief in God is a prime candidate.

This 'enlightenment' view of history is very deeply linked to ideas about 'modernity' and 'progress'. We are dealing with challenging and powerful ideas that have shaped the world we live in for a very long time. What most people don't realise is that for all the bluster of atheist views of the past and the future, they piggy-back on some very theistic ideas – more of that later.

Over the past decade or so, you will have been hearing a lot of talk about 'post-modernity'. Like many people, you may be confused by the way that the term applies to all sorts of

things in different ways. A term initially used by architects, postmodernism has come to describe the popular and intellectual culture's reaction against modernism – the big story of progress and improvement. It rejects this story (somebody has called it the 'enlightenment meta-narrative') because the promised progress simply hasn't materialised, and the world's problems are still here with us. You might most readily associate post-modernity with a denial of truth and moral relativism – this is because it has not only rejected the enlightenment meta-narrative (meta-narrative is pretty close in meaning to world-view) but all other stories as well. All meta-narratives are seen to be oppressive and search for purpose tends to be seen as the search for authenticity rather than truth.

Most postmodernists would be deeply suspicious of any dogmatic, theistic world-view, but the point here is that they are, by definition, terminally critically of modernism – the historical expression of the atheistic world-view and all that it carries with it. In his book, *The Twilight of Atheism*, Alistair McGrath puts it like this:

'Post-modernity affirms philosophical modesty, noting limits to our knowledge; it does not – and indeed, cannot – make declarations concerning what does exist and what does not exist... post-modernity seriously undermines the plausibility of atheism.'

### **THE CHRISTIAN WORLD-VIEW – THE AUTHENTIC STORY?**

Yet again, the Christian world-view offers a completely different account of the solution. For the theist, and particularly for the Christian, evil and suffering are undeniably part of the world – but there's nothing to suggest that human endeavour and self-improvement can ever eradicate them for good. We are also undeniably infected by evil (which the Bible sometimes calls sin) but we will never simply evolve our way out of it. Instead, the Christian solution is the solution of God creatively intervening in his own world to do something with it and with us – that is THE Christian story.

### **TAKING THE INITIATIVE**

The first couple of chapters of the Bible describe how, shortly after human beings rebelled against their creator by disobeying a clear command, God acted to put things right. It is striking that just after God had pronounced judgement on the world (but before he banished Adam and Eve from the garden) he made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them (Genesis 3.21).

God later entered into a 'covenant' with Abraham. In the ancient Near East, the Hebrew term 'covenant' was used to refer to a 'bond' or 'relationship' between two parties, usually in the form of a political treaty. The covenant was imposed upon conquered subjects by the absolute authority and power of a conquering king. In the biblical story, God promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation and that all peoples on earth would be

blessed through him (Genesis 12). God's covenant with Israel was to work like this: Israel was to worship God as her king and enjoy the benefits of being a great nation. She was to be God's restored humanity, a community that reflected the 'image of God' and acted as the 'light' of the world, 'salt' to the earth, the source of blessing to all nations. The world was to 'look in' at Israel and, in her, see the true God and true humanity (Psalm 67.1-2).

The tragedy of Israel's history, as seen throughout the pages of the Old Testament, is that she consistently failed to fulfil her calling. Instead of being counter-cultural, Israel tended to absorb the theology and praxis of the nations surrounding her. The consequences of this were devastating. God's judgement against Israel was expressed in the form of exile into Babylon (597 BC). In 538 BC, the exiles slowly returned to the Holy Land but, except for a relatively short period (the Hasmonean dynasty, second and first century BC), they never again truly ruled themselves.

Although by the first century most Jews considered themselves to be a 'saved' people in the sense that they were God's people, promised life in the age to come – the resurrection –, they also felt that, because of their sin, God was continuing to discipline them with politically, socially and religiously 'hard times' (to quote Dickens). They felt distant from God's blessing, even when living in Israel. So the Jewish people awaited 'salvation' in the sense of dramatic release from the oppressive doldrums in which they had drifted. They looked for a new 'exodus', in which God would 'return' as king and release his people, perhaps via a national, political and military victory over their oppressors. They longed to see the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.' (Isaiah 40.1– 2)

### **THE NEW ISRAEL**

It was in this first-century context that Jesus took his contemporaries by storm by declaring: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near' (Mathew 4.17). Tom Wright notes that 'He was telling his hearers to give up their agendas, and to trust him for his way of being Israel, his way of bringing the Kingdom, his kingdom agenda' (*The Challenge of Jesus*). In the synagogue Jesus quoted Isaiah the prophet: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them: 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'" (Luke 4.16-21) Imagine the impact that these words had on the people present. The hairs on the backs of

their necks would have been standing on end. Or perhaps they walked away with revulsion at this upstart's apparent self-importance.

The message of Jesus implied that God was 'returning' to his exiled people through him, God's chosen one. Jesus announced and enacted the 'good news of the kingdom of God', the fulfilment of Isaiah 40.1–2 and the end of Israel's exile (Luke 7.21–23). God had come to release and renew his people, but not quite in the way they expected. Jesus embarked on forming a 'new Israel' around himself, beginning with the twelve disciples who represented the twelve historic tribes. Incorporation into the people of God, freedom from spiritual exile, was now dependent on acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and Lord. The evidence of the kingdom could be seen in the signs and wonders associated with its arrival – the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, those with leprosy being cured, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised to life and the good news being preached (Matthew 11.2–6).

### **THE SUFFERING SERVANT**

It was the power of this agenda that provoked the authorities to commit murder. In an attempt to silence the Galilean itinerant preacher and crush his fledgling movement, they executed him. Jesus took upon himself the role of the suffering servant described in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Like millions of people ever since, Jesus' followers came to understand that forgiveness of sins was the real deliverance God had promised them and that this had been accomplished through the sacrificial death of Jesus. In the cross, God absorbed the suffering and guilt of his spoiled and decaying world, dealing with the world's evil at a stroke. Seemingly, the death of King Jesus was the ultimate proof that the reign of God had ended in failure and that he had been defeated by his enemies. The return of the king, in the resurrection, demonstrated that the opposite was true. Only an event as seismic as the resurrection could vindicate Jesus' earlier Messianic claims, given his crucifixion by the Romans.

### **IN CONCLUSION**

If you are person with a theistic/Christian world-view, what we've said here might ring true. Through and in Jesus, God has acted decisively to deal with the evil of the world, and the evil of human hearts. If, on the other hand, you don't have that world-view, you're probably disgusted that you've spent so much time reading on. Surely, you might argue, if God has sought to deal with the world's evil then he might as well not have bothered – the twentieth century was perhaps the most conspicuously evil, flawed century in the history of the world. If the modernist project is naïve, and indeed has been completely found out, then how can the Christian world-view endure?

In fact, the Christian world-view includes a necessary dimension of future hope – what Jesus achieved on the cross and through the resurrection must be implemented. Remember how we said the enlightenment project piggy-backed on theistic ideas? Well, this is where we see that most clearly. After turning a corner on that first Easter morning, all of creation is heading towards a final fruition; the Church is both the first expression of that new creation and the people, the new Israel, are charged with delivering it. Tom Wright puts it like this:

‘The project of creation, the good world which God made at the beginning, was supposed to go forward under the wise stewardship of the human race, God’s vice-regents, God’s image-bearers; and that, when the human race turned to worship creation instead of God, the project could not proceed in the intended manner, but instead bore thorns and thistles... that the new creation which began at Easter will one day be complete, and that with that completion there will be full healing, full understanding, full reconciliation, full consolation. The thorns and thistles will be replaced by the cypress and myrtle.’

Christianity is not a leisure activity. Understanding Christianity as a total life system, not just a personal or private dogma, is absolutely essential to making sense of the world and combating forces hostile to our faith. Ideas have consequences. Darwin and Darwinism, to take just one example, have had a major impact on our culture and world. In 1999 Pope John Paul II urged Christians everywhere to make the new millennium a ‘spring time’ of Christianity. Only as we start to see Christianity as a comprehensive framework of truth – and live this out - will this dream be truly realised.

#### **QUOTES**

‘The church envisaged in the New Testament is a radical new community in which the meaninglessness of life is marvellously resolved. The contemporary reality, and especially the European reality, is vastly different, an institution locked into the past, preoccupied with arcane irrelevancies, yet perennially confronted by a hurting and helpless world, its questions unanswered and its meaninglessness unresolved.’ (Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness: The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder*)

#### **FURTHER READING**

Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.