

9. THE KINGDOM WITHOUT THE KING

“I can’t breathe.”

— George Floyd, 25 May 2020

He said it 27 times in nine minutes. George Floyd’s plea to an indifferent police officer kneeling on the back of his neck was desperately familiar. “I can’t breathe” were the last words of many others including Eric Garner, another black man killed in a police encounter in 2014. But the words and the context of Floyd’s death had a resonance that went deeper still.

The cell-phone footage rippled out from Minneapolis so that, within days, there were thousands of protests not only around the United States but in Germany, the UK, France, Mexico, Australia, Israel, Southeast Asia and parts of Africa. This prompted Joe Biden to claim that Floyd’s death was having a greater worldwide impact than Martin Luther King’s had had. More than half a century after King’s assassination, the comparisons were not difficult to make. These were black men unjustly killed by white aggressors, and their deaths struck right at the heart of America’s claim to be founded on inalienable rights and equality. King had called the Declaration of Independence a “promissory note”, unfulfilled in his day. 52 years later protestors took to the streets—at least

15 million of them in the US alone—marching, toppling statues and raising their voices to demand that the promise be realised.

The fact that all this was occurring three months into a global pandemic reminds us that there are human values that eclipse even those of life and health. It turns out that we are not merely biological creatures seeking safety or capitalist consumers seeking comfort. We are moral agents seeking righteousness. Martin Luther King was correct to speak of a “moral universe”. That’s where we live. And that’s why we all care so much about justice (even if we disagree about how such justice should be achieved).

But of all the events that might have lit the fuse, why did Floyd’s death affect us so profoundly? In a sense this whole book is an answer to that question. Floyd’s death gripped us because our moral universe has been birthed out of similar pains. It was an echo of what happened on a hill outside Jerusalem two millennia before: an unarmed victim of oppression; an uncaring authority; a public and humiliating death; and a world that came to see the virtue of the victim and the tyranny of the oppressor. Even Floyd’s cry, “I can’t breathe”, could have been placed on Christ’s own lips. As author and tech entrepreneur Antonio García Martínez has said, “The Western mind is like a tuning fork calibrated to one frequency: the Christ story. Hit it with the right Christ figure, and it’ll just hum deafeningly in resonance.”¹⁴⁷

147 Antonio García Martínez, “The Christ with a thousand faces”. <https://www.thepullrequest.com/p/the-christ-with-a-thousand-faces>. Accessed 26th January 2022.

Floyd came to be seen as just such a Christ figure by many—even if they might never have acknowledged this as such. He was quickly identified as a kind of martyr and saint. Religious responses were everywhere. Street art put a halo above Floyd’s head, crowds were led in communal acts of repentance, and they confessed together “creedal” truths about race and equality.

One prominent act, “taking the knee”, goes back, at least in part, to the very heart of our story of freedom and progress. The emblem of the abolitionists, the Wedgwood anti-slavery medallion, depicted an enslaved man kneeling while asking, “Am I not a man and a brother?” The right of every person to equal humanity before the law was bound up with their equal humility before God. Kneeling was also a compelling image in the civil-rights movement. In a famous photograph from 1965, King is leading many protesters in prayer as they are about to be jailed. All are kneeling. There are certainly other influences on “taking the knee”—these currents and trends swirl around us, with the sources not always clear. Yet we are swept along nonetheless.

In 2020 these gestures, slogans and movements came together with remarkable force. They carried—and were carried upon—streams of moral and political sentiment so powerful that they are best described as religious. More particularly, they are Christian in their source.

And it’s not just those who marched who found themselves swept up. Those who questioned the protests were appealing to Christian convictions too. Keir Starmer wanted the Edward Colston statue down but via

democratic means (a process assuming the equal voice of all). Many supported the protests but emphasised King’s methods of *non-violent* resistance. Others worried that some anti-racist movements were re-racialising the discourse and reversing King’s teaching that people should be judged *not* “by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”.

On and on it goes; back and forth the arguments run, with one set of Christian-ish instincts clashing with another. Whether people realise it or not, these culture wars involve devout believers hurling Bible verses at one another—they’ve just forgotten the references.

Perhaps, though, the days of Christian influence are over in the West—or, at least, severely numbered. It might be granted that Christianity has profoundly shaped our culture up to now, but haven’t we now lost touch with our traditional roots? This is our next “Hang On”.

HANG ON: ISN’T CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE OVER IN THE WEST?

In October 2019, a British court ruled against David Mackereth in a case that epitomises our modern culture wars. In a job interview Mackereth, a doctor with 30 years of experience, wished to reserve the right not to refer to, in his words, “a 6ft-tall bearded man as ‘madam’”.¹⁴⁸ When he was not employed, he claimed he was discriminated against because he made known that his beliefs were based

148 “David Mackereth: Christian doctor loses trans beliefs case”, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-49904997>. Accessed 31st October 2021.

on Genesis 1:27—the verse we’ve referenced more than any other in this book. For Mackereth, the belief that “God created mankind in his own image ... male and female” was foundational. When the case went to court, the ruling went against Mackereth. In particular, the doctor’s belief in Genesis 1:27 was singled out by the judge as “incompatible with human dignity”. And so the verse that lies at the roots of “human dignity” was condemned in a judgment that very much calls to mind the image of a culture sawing at the branch of the tree on which it is perched.

So has the tide of Christian influence finally gone out? That kind of imagery has long been reflected in the language of conservative and religious types who lament the retreat of faith in the public square. The 19th-century poet Matthew Arnold once spoke of the “long, withdrawing roar” of the “Sea of Faith”, leaving us with “neither joy, nor love, nor light”:

*“The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.”*¹⁴⁹

If Arnold could write this in 1851 (when half of England was in church on a Sunday), what would he make of today?¹⁵⁰

149 “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43588/dover-beach>. Accessed 30th October 2021.

150 10 million of Britain’s population of 18 million attended church in 1851. This

What should we make of it when church attendance in England is around 6%, and the biblical foundations of society are sometimes publicly condemned?¹⁵¹

Well, it's worth remembering that tides go out, but they also come in. There have been many "long, withdrawing roars" in church history and equally many extraordinary surges. Tides do not go out for ever. But there is another way to develop the "sea of faith" analogy: the power of the water is in evidence no matter what its current level is. The terrain at low tide has been shaped by the ocean as surely as the beach at high tide. In other words, Christianity is still powerfully at work in all these contemporary trends, and those both inside and outside the church should be aware of the dynamics. Let's consider them in the Mackereth case.

In 2019 the beliefs of Dr Mackereth, a committed Christian, ran up against transgender ideology, but both outlooks were dependent, in their own ways, on Christian assumptions. In particular, the first three values considered by this book—equality, compassion and consent—were driving the arguments. It's just that, in the case of certain transgender advocates, those values have been divorced from the Christian story and then combined in a new way. Let's examine both: the divorce and the recombination.

was split between about 5 million in the Church of England and 5 million in the remaining denominations. "Religious Worship in England and Wales, Census of Great Britain, 1851", <https://archive.org/details/censusgreatbrit00manngoog>. Accessed 30th October 2021.

151 P. Brierley, *UK Church Statistics 3, 2018 Edition*, (ABCD Publishers, 2017).

When *equality* is divorced from the Christian story, it risks becoming a radical individualism. Ancient people considered their identity in collective ways, and individuality got lost in the shuffle. We have the opposite danger. We consider our society as a loose association of individuals who each have equal rights before the law. It can become very atomistic: I begin my thinking with myself and my identity. Where, in other cultures, I would look outwards to discover my identity, in our culture I look inwards. Where other cultures major on responsibilities, we major on rights. No wonder a sense of community suffers. No wonder *all* forms of institutional affiliations are tanking across the board (not just church attendance).

In Christianity the principle is that all sit equally at the same table. The modern goal is for all to climb equally high up their own ladders. Where the Bible says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), 21st-century Westerners now finish that sentence, “... for you are all individuals”. Or, worse, “... for you are all interchangeable”. At that point, the distance travelled from the Scriptural truth is immense.

When *compassion* is divorced from the Christian story, it risks generating “competitive victimhood”. This is the name sociologists have given for the way victim status can be quickly claimed to gain an advantage. In Christianity, the Victim, Jesus, suffered redemptively and offers dignity and hope to the oppressed. The danger nowadays is that our chief desire is not to honour and help victims but to become them. Where virtue was once the cultivation of a great heart, nowadays we seek to demonstrate a thin skin.

And with so many claiming victimisation—a great many of them having genuine grievances—we lack a richer moral vision to arbitrate. The clashes between feminists (or religious minorities) on the one hand and trans-rights activists on the other demonstrate the point. Here we see claims made on both sides about the protection of the oppressed. Which should take precedence, when, and on what grounds? To answer those questions we need a far more robust understanding of the meaning of gender, bodies, personhood and community. And we need more tools at our disposal than an insistence on “my rights”, the retelling of “my suffering” and some caps-locked tweets reminding people, “IT’S THE 21ST CENTURY FOR GOODNESS SAKE.”

When sexual *consent* is divorced from the Christian story, it risks reducing sex to something far less than the Christian vision. It detaches consent—a vital component of the sexual relationship—from other values, like commitment. It also risks detaching sex from a richer story about its meaning. It can naively assume that sex involves uncomplicated choices regarding a leisure activity. In reality, power differentials, both social and physical, are always present, and sex is woven into the fabric of our bodies, our personal relationships and our societal structures. As the individualists that we are, we are minded to view sex as a matter for private individuals making a private transaction, but our identities, our bodies, our lives and our sexual choices are intimately connected to marriage, children, family, biology and the wider community. Consent is vital, but it is not a sufficient foundation for sexual ethics.

Now mix these three abstracted values together in a certain way and you have a heady brew: the power of the individual; the power of the minority; and the power of personal choice, especially in sexual matters. These are foundational beliefs for transgender ideology. For the trans-rights activist it adds up to this: I have an absolute right to self-identify, independent of culture or biology, and, as a minority, my choice must be honoured. Obviously this ideology is not Christian, but it emerges from strongly held convictions that would be utterly inconceivable without Christianity.

On the other side, David Mackereth has his own Christian foundations: the rights to religious liberty, to freedom of speech and to freedom of conscience; science (in particular, biological definitions of sex); and the scriptural authority which grounds our equality in the first place (Genesis 1:27!). And so what we have in this 2019 tribunal is a clash between traditional and secularised versions of some foundationally *Christian* values. What was alarming was not so much that the ruling went against Mackereth—in culture wars some battles are won and some are lost. What was alarming was the reason given. The judge ruled that Genesis 1 itself was the problem. As Spencer Klavan has said, calling the image of God “incompatible with human dignity is akin to insisting that seeds are incompatible with flowers, or grain with bread.”¹⁵² It is to condemn the roots of the tree, even as you depend on the fruits it has yielded.

152 “Going Off the Rails”, Spencer Klavan, *Clermont Review of Books*, Winter 2020, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/going-off-the-rails>. Accessed 20th October 2021.

Such a trend towards ever-increasing secularisation is not, therefore, a sustainable strategy. It is, as we will see, a recipe for fracture and not freedom. But one thing it reveals is the inescapable influence of Christianity. Even as Genesis is condemned, it is condemned for “Christian” reasons.

The tide is certainly out in terms of Christianity’s explicit influence on Western culture. But the terrain has been shaped by a “sea of faith” far deeper and more enduring than our current cultural moment. And as we witness the fear, confusion, and tribalism of our post-Christian age, there are reasons for people within *and beyond* the church to wish for the tide to turn.

“SOMEONE IS WRONG ON THE INTERNET”

In recent years cavernous fault lines have opened up in Western society. Some blame catastrophes like 9/11, the financial crash of 2007, and the COVID pandemic. Others blame polarising social media and/or a polarising US President. But no matter where we line up on these cultural divides, the values to which we appeal largely remain. Whether you agree or disagree with “taking the knee”, or toppling statues, or “black lives matter”, or Black Lives Matter, or defunding the police, or reparations for slavery, or a thousand other questions stirred by the death of George Floyd, the fundamentals remain. We still believe in the WEIRD values at the heart of this book:

- Consider equality: once, steep moral hierarchies were the norm; now we want to root out inequalities wherever we find them.

- Consider compassion: once, pity for the undeserving was considered a weakness; now we consider it a virtue.
- Consider consent: once, powerful men could possess the bodies of whomever they pleased; now we name this as the abuse that it is.
- Consider enlightenment: once, education was a luxury for rich men; now we consider it a necessity for all.
- Consider science: once, knowledge of the natural world was based on the assertions of authorities; now we hold the powerful to account and we seek to test such claims against objective standards.
- Consider freedom: once, it was assumed that certain classes of people could be enslaved; now we consider that idea a kind of “blasphemy”.
- Consider progress: once, history was thought of as a descent from a golden age; now we feel that the arc of history bends, or should bend, towards justice.

These are our credal convictions, and, by and large, we are a society of believers. So thoroughly do we assent to these values that we rarely notice how weird they are, or how WEIRD we are for holding them. But with these morals in place, we have found that we can discard institutional Christianity *yet carry on with the moralising*. In fact, the moralising, far from receding, is coming to the fore. This has been a shock to many.

We used to think that “without God ... all things are permitted”.¹⁵³ That was a line the novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky put into the mouth of one of his characters over 140 years ago. Many have believed this sentiment whether they are inside or outside the church. It seems logical that without God and without the constraints of organised religion, society might enjoy greater freedom. It turns out we enjoy finger-wagging even more. Without God it’s not that everything is permitted—instead, everything is preachy. Painfully so.

If anyone blasphemes our WEIRD values (or if anyone can be portrayed as blaspheming them), we “cancel” them—that is, we ostracise them socially and professionally. This is really a modern form of “excommunication” for modern kinds of “heretics”. And while our modern “inquisitions” are less fatal than the old ones (for which we give great thanks), they are also much more widespread. The process is described in detail by Jon Ronson in his book, *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*. The storms of public outrage that sweep through social media mean that thousands at a time are able to take on the roles of judge, jury and executioner. So while the person accused of “blaspheming” is buried beneath the barrage, the multitudes who participate in the pile-on get lost in the crowd: “The snowflake never needs to feel responsible for the avalanche”.¹⁵⁴ The role of inquisitor has been democratised. Anyone can join the Twitchfork mob, and everyone is invited—continually. But if anyone can participate in the pile on, it’s difficult

153 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (North Point Press, 1990), p 589.

154 Jon Ronson, *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* (Pan Macmillan, 2015), p 53.

to escape the feeling that, equally, anyone could be the next target.

There are many factors at play in what has been dubbed “cancel culture”. Certainly, social media plays a role in the ways it turbocharges our outrage. But the existence of the outrage in the first place is a matter of the heart. It arises when enlightened souls feel compelled to enlighten others who are lost in the dark. It’s fundamentally an evangelistic zeal—there’s a preacher inside us all. You don’t need to be a churchgoer to feel it.

One of the more perfect depictions of online culture is a cartoon which shows a man angrily hammering at his keyboard while his partner says, “Are you coming to bed?” “I can’t,” he replies. “Someone is wrong on the internet.”¹⁵⁵ The man is, for want of a better word, a missionary. He is enlightened, and he wants to shine that light into dark places. He feels a burning passion to proclaim the truth and liberate those who are bound by lies. The internet did not make him like this; it merely helped him to spread the word. His need to be right and to share that rightness with others goes very deep. Place him together with others who are similarly convinced of their rightness and you will get accusations flying with a strength of feeling, a righteous indignation and a desire to banish the blasphemer that could well be described as “religious”. It is the worst version of the Christian instinct towards “enlightenment”. And it lacks the very heart of what Christianity has to offer: *forgiveness*.

155 “Duty Calls,” <https://xkcd.com/386/>. Accessed 3rd November 2021.

THE CURSE OF SEMI-CHRISTIANITY

In *The Madness of Crowds*, author Douglas Murray speaks of the moral certainties that nowadays are turned into moralising crusades. He devotes a chapter to the subject of forgiveness, seeing it as a lost art in modern life. As a society we have, it seems, kept Christianity's sense of sin but forgotten entirely about salvation. We are all "guilt" and no "grace".

*"As one of the consequences of the death of God, [the 19th century philosopher] Nietzsche foresaw that people could find themselves stuck in cycles of Christian theology with no way out. Specifically that people would inherit the concepts of guilt, sin and shame but would be without the means of redemption which the Christian religion also offered. Today we do seem to live in a world where ... guilt and shame are more at hand than ever, and where we have no means whatsoever of redemption."*¹⁵⁶

This is inevitable. The Western experiment has been an attempt to secularise Christianity. As Johnny Cash once sang, "They say they want the kingdom, but they don't want God in it." In order to pursue the kingdom without the King, we have had to dethrone the *person* of Christ and install abstract values instead. The problem should be obvious: persons can forgive you; values cannot. Values can only judge you.

Such values were never ultimate in Christianity. Christian morals have always been the morals *to a story*. In the

¹⁵⁶ Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), p 182.

West today we have ditched the story, anonymised the Hero and kept the morals—and now we wonder why our culture splinters under a million angry accusations. The kingdom without the King is not a place of liberation so much as a place of judgment. But in this democratic republic, we are all the judges, and we are all the judged. We desperately need a *person* above and beyond the values—a person who does not simply expect our best but who forgives our worst.

When considering the seven values of the last seven chapters, we might nod them through as fine ideas (we can't help but do that). But who can claim to have fulfilled them? Who has never used their power to the detriment of another? Who has never acted as though their life was of greater value than those of the people around them? Who has always shown compassion to those who are in need? Certainly not me. And if you're honest enough to admit it, not you either.

As we tear down Edward Colston, how can we do so without inviting similar scrutiny of our own culture, our own complicity, our own crimes. We ought to ask ourselves, "How will history judge us?" Or, to put the question in a biblical frame, "How will God judge us?"

The Old Testament psalm asks, "If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). It expects the answer "no one". Not Colston and not me. Wonderfully, though, the psalm continues, "But with you there is forgiveness" (v 4). History cannot forgive us but only judge us. Values cannot forgive us but only judge us. But with God there is forgiveness. He is above the

values. He is free to treat us better than our law-breaking deserves. In fact, he promises to forgive us when we come to him with our guilt.

This is the heart of the Christian story we have been telling. When Jesus came, he described himself as a spiritual doctor. As such he was drawn not to the fit but to the failing:

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:17)

Christ presents himself not as a moral policeman but as a spiritual healer. He comes not to accuse but to acquit, if only we will own our need for it. Here is the heart of Christian faith: admitting our sin and knowing Christ’s forgiveness. For those who know that they are like Edward Colston—a mixture of some goodness and much badness, with more than enough corruption to condemn them—this is wonderful news. The Doctor will see us. He will forgive us and, having forgiven us, he will teach us to forgive others.

At the heart of the daily prayer that Christ teaches his followers is the plea “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” (Matthew 6:9-15, NLV). This is what the Bible means by living a life “under grace” (Romans 6:14). To be “under grace” is to receive the stream of undeserved mercy flowing from above and to share it with others.

The alternative, biblically speaking, is to live “under law”. If “grace” is a flow from above, “law” is a ladder we must

climb—some are higher, some are lower, and all feel judged. This is the nature of secularised “Christianity”. Our abstract values are laws. And when laws are the air we breathe, our atmosphere is judgment. It’s suffocating.

In the 19th century the preacher Charles Spurgeon warned about the dangers of semi-Christianity. He said, “Be half a Christian and you shall have enough religion to make you miserable”.¹⁵⁷ He was concerned for individual churchgoers who knew enough of the Bible to understand its good advice but not its good news. They appreciated Christ’s standards but not Christ’s story. They therefore knew the laws but not the love—the guilt but not the grace. This did not leave them halfway happy but downright despondent.

What Spurgeon witnessed in individuals we can see in society. We have a kind of semi-Christianity in the West, and it’s enough to make us miserable. In the next chapter we will consider the way forward: a return to the real thing.

157 Charles Spurgeon, “The Foundation and Its Seal—a Sermon for the Times” <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons31.xxxix.html>. Accessed 31st October 2021. It goes on, “Be wholly a Christian and your joy shall be full!”

10. CHOOSE YOUR MIRACLE

“I’m amazed at my own belief, and I don’t understand it.”

— Jordan Peterson, 2021

We met Jordan Peterson back in chapter 2. He is a best-selling author, a psychology professor and a successful YouTuber. For years he has maintained a studied agnosticism about his faith. When asked whether he believes in God, he repeatedly states that he doesn’t like the question but that he acts as though God exists. In 2017 he began a series of surprisingly popular biblical lectures walking slowly through the stories of Genesis and bringing out their psychological significance. As he has written:

“The Bible is, for better or worse, the foundational document of western civilization ... Its careful, respectful study can reveal things to us about what we believe and how we do and should act that can be discovered in almost no other manner.”¹⁵⁸

This has made many uncomfortable. When he debated with the atheist Sam Harris in four popular events in 2018, the fear was expressed that Peterson, and others

158 Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules For Life* (Random House Canada, 2018), p 104.

like him, were merely “Jesus smuggling”. It’s the idea that Peterson is concealing his true Christian intentions, masking them with a veneer of scientific and intellectual respectability. Underneath the secular-speak, they fear, he is trying to sneak Jesus into our hearts and minds.

If you’ve been following the argument of this book, you will recognise the tactic. But you will also recognise that it’s not Jordan Peterson who is Jesus-smuggling. Western civilisation is a vast, centuries-long exercise in Jesus-smuggling. At first it was overt; now it’s covert. Today, whether we’re talking about rights, or “diversity and inclusion”, or the miracle of scientific intelligibility, or humanitarian ideals, or a moral universe bending towards justice, we are complicit in an immense Bible-trafficking operation. When we speak of humanity, history, freedom, progress, or enlightenment values, with the significance now attached to those terms, we are carrying on a Christian conversation. The language and logic are unmistakable even if at points we’ve learnt to modify our vocabulary.

It’s not just Peterson who is pointing out the Christian sources of our values. In this book we have already heard from writers such as Larry Siedentop, Tom Holland, Rodney Stark, Kyle Harper, Joseph Henrich and others. None of them are Christians, but all of them are noticing how comprehensively we have been shaped by Christian history. And what these writers are engaged in is the opposite of Jesus-smuggling—they’re exposing the Christianity which has already been smuggled into every corner of our world. Peterson and others are outing the true Bible bootleggers: the secularists.

But even as Peterson acknowledges the foundation of our values, doing so has also set him on a personal journey. The opening quotation from this chapter is taken from an interview with Christian YouTuber Jonathan Pageau in 2021. Peterson wept as he admitted being drawn, almost against his will, towards Christian faith.

Yet the fascinating part was his reasoning. In leaning towards Christian faith and away from a purely secular account of the world, he recognised that *both* positions—the Christian *and* the secular—were faith positions. Both involve “impossible” assertions.

“I’ve got the choice of believing two impossible things. I can either believe that the world is constituted so that God took on flesh and was crucified and rose three days later or I can believe that human beings invented this unbelievably preposterous story that has stretched into every atom of culture. And it isn’t obvious to me that the second hypothesis is any easier to believe than the first. Because the more you investigate the manifestations of the story of Christ the more insanely complicated and far-reaching it becomes.”¹⁵⁹

It is “impossible” to believe that God took on humanity, died and rose again. But it’s also “impossible” to believe that this “preposterous story” has reached into every facet of modern life to transform it utterly. A Christian believes the first impossible truth but a secularist is left with the second. We all have “impossible” faith positions then.

159 Jordan B. Peterson Podcast S4 E8, 1st March 2021: <https://youtu.be/2rAqVmZwqZM>. Accessed 1st November 2021.

How should we break the deadlock? Well, it's worth remembering that the second impossible thing—the enduring influence of the Jesus story—has in fact happened: *a man on a cross has made our Western world*. At this point, even the staunchest rationalist is left with an absurdity. But the Christian can come along with an explanation: “The reason a man on a cross has made our world is because he is our Maker—God himself.”

Peterson's story is far from over and far from a straight line. Who knows where his journey will take him? This is not about claiming him for “Team Jesus” nor implying that he will inevitably gravitate towards church. The point is simply to acknowledge some of his key insights. He shows us that everyone is a believer, everyone has absurdities to own, and everyone must account for the incomparable impact of Jesus Christ.

There is, of course, a natural response to all this. It takes seriously the points made above, but it says, “Fine. We came from Christianity, but so what? Our values had to come from *somewhere*. None of this makes Christianity *inevitable or true*.”

In the next section I want to respond to this by underlining two extraordinary features of the Jesus revolution which convince me that its source is ultimately from above rather than below—from God and not simply from human developments. First, it has fulfilled predictions, and, second, it has defied expectations. In all this I invite you to consider that Christianity is not a “natural” development, but something *supernatural*.

PREDICTING THE PECULIAR

From beginning to end, the Bible predicts and proclaims an extraordinary development in world affairs: the victory of the Victim.

First, the Old Testament. These books could also be called “the Jewish Scriptures” or “the Hebrew Bible”. Even the latest of these books was written hundreds of years before the first Christmas, yet they speak of a coming Messiah (“anointed one”) with a startling beauty, unity and clarity.

In Genesis 3, as soon as Adam and Eve plunge the world into ruin (“the fall”), they hear a prophecy of redemption in which the offspring of the woman (a promised Saviour) will crush the head of the serpent (the bringer of death and chaos). Yet even as the Saviour deals the death blow, his heel will be struck (Genesis 3:15). He would defeat evil through suffering.

As Genesis continues, the question rolls on: who will bear this promised child? We meet Abraham (father of the Jewish nation), his offspring Isaac, Isaac’s offspring Jacob, and then Jacob’s twelve sons. The promise is being narrowed to a single family line. By the end of the Bible’s first book, we hear Jacob’s prophecy about his son Judah:

“The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.” (Genesis 49:10)

Judah will father Israel’s royal tribe, and yet each king will be only a throne-warmer for the universal Ruler. One

day the golden child will come. And this King from the line of little old Judah will be a King for the whole world.

Let's jump forwards to the prophets (leaping over dozens of similar prophecies and several hundred years of history), and listen in as these divinely appointed messengers take up the theme of the promised birth:

*“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and for ever.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)*

The promised child will be the “Mighty God”, taking charge of his own creation and bringing an unstoppable reign of peace. His kingdom will increase continually from the time of his birth “and for ever”. This is not usual for kingdoms. Everyone knows that kingdoms rise and fall—certainly the Israelites did. They endured the cruelties of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and, in time, the Romans. But while the British Museum displays the scattered remains of those mighty empires, the kingdom of the Messiah continues to grow, just as predicted. It's a theme taken up by another prophet: Daniel.

In one vision the 6th-century prophet Daniel pictures an impressive statue made of four materials representing the oppressive kingdoms mentioned above. But he also prophesies an unlikely victor over imperial power. “A rock ... cut out, but not by human hands” strikes the statue, destroying it. The stone then grows to become “a huge mountain” and fills “the whole earth” (Daniel 2:34, 35). In chapter 7 Daniel reprises the same themes. This time the empires are represented by beasts brutalising God’s people, and yet there comes one who is not beastly at all, who is described as being “like a son of man” (Daniel 7:13). Against the monstrous forces of worldly might, what hope does this “son of man” have? Yet the son of man turns out to be God’s “right-hand man”, and through his *humanity* (not his cruelty) he overcomes the imperial powers:

“He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:14)

No wonder messianic expectation was at fever pitch in the 1st century. Israel was in the grip of that fourth beastly power, Rome. It was time for the promised Saviour to come. When Jesus arrived on the scene, he stepped confidently into these expectations. He responded to many titles: “Messiah” (Matthew 16:16), “Son of David” (Luke 18:38), and “Son of God” (John 11:27). He also accepted worship as “Lord and ... God” (John 20:28). But the title he used of himself more than any other was “Son of Man”.

He certainly carried himself as though he had that long-prophesied “everlasting dominion”. He was a penniless preacher without a scrap of earthly power, and yet he considered his words to be eternally authoritative (Matthew 24:35). He never wrote a book or founded a school, but he considered his judgment to be everlastingly decisive (Matthew 25:31-34). He never entered politics or religious orders or the military, but he was confident that the movement he founded would be like a pinch of yeast which works its way into the whole batch of dough—the whole world (Matthew 13:33). Likewise, he predicted that his teaching would be like the smallest seed that ends up growing into the largest tree (v 31-32). From small beginnings his kingdom would expand to fill the earth. Intriguingly Jesus adds the detail of birds who find themselves perching in the tree’s branches (v 32). The last time Jesus mentioned birds, they were pecking at the seed—opposing the growth (v 4). Now they find their home within it. Such is the surprising and inexorable expansion of the Jesus movement, and all of it was predicted long in advance.

Yet Jesus did not merely predict that his movement would triumph; he predicted how. Remarkably, it would be through the victory of the Victim. In Matthew 16 Jesus proclaims two certainties: he will assuredly die a violent death, and his movement will assuredly conquer the world. The church, he says, will expand far into enemy territory: even “the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:13-18). Gates, of course, are static. The church is not. The image is of the church advancing irresistibly, breaking down the gates of hell, plundering

the kingdom of darkness, rescuing captives for the kingdom of light. And while, in the ensuing ages, there will be great hardship, Jesus declares—in his provincial northern accent—that the good news of his kingdom “will be preached in the whole world” (Matthew 24:14).

Within days of this declaration, Christ is hanging on a Roman cross in God-forsaken agony. It looks nothing like a triumph. Yet even in this moment, Jesus’ confidence is unshaken. His dying words, “It is finished”, are a cry of victory (John 19:30). He considers himself to be accomplishing his life’s work. In laying down his life on the cross, he is taking on himself the sin and guilt of his people. He is doing what love does: entering the world of his beloved to shoulder their burdens. The Judge is judged in our place, so that we, the guilty, may go free. Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

But is this really a victory? It’s not if the Victim remains in the grave.

Three days later, so the Gospels tell us, Jesus rose up bodily and appeared to his disciples, alive again. And he gave to his ragtag group of followers a global assignment: they must go into all the world and make the nations into followers of the Jewish Messiah (Matthew 28:18-20). This is what Genesis promised, this is what Jesus commanded, and this is what his movement has been accomplishing ever since.

When we see the triumph of the Jesus revolution, we are not simply looking back at a curious twist in the tale of world history. The twist was foretold. The victory

of the Victim was prophesied in the Hebrew Bible and proclaimed by Christ himself long before there was any earthly plausibility regarding its fulfilment.

But perhaps that sounds all too suspicious for you. Here is our final “Hang On”.

HANG ON: WAS THE JESUS STORY FABRICATED?

We have been putting quite a bit of store by Matthew’s Gospel in the arguments above. Perhaps Matthew and the other Gospel writers are not to be trusted. Perhaps they took strands of the historical Jesus and wove them together with the extraordinary prophecies of old to create a fabulous tale—one to take the world by storm. It’s worth pressing into that possibility. If nothing else, doing so reveals the scale of the project.

Imagine the writers’ room as someone commissions the authors of the Gospels:

“Ok, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I have a job for you. I know you’ve had no training or prior experience, but we need you to write the most influential works in literature. As for the timing, we’ll have to move on this unfortunately. It would have been better to wait a couple of centuries before inventing our legends; that way none of Christ’s contemporaries could contradict our story. But we are where we are: the apostle Paul has forced the pace, writing his letters to churches around the Mediterranean. He’s been preaching Jesus as the promised Messiah and, heaven knows why, but all these people have believed in ‘God on a cross’. The story

seems to be working, so now we need you to fill in the details. Please can you write the origins story for our Hero? Paul's letters gave the bare bones; we want you to put warm flesh on them. Are you up to it?

“It won't be easy. We need this to be the life and times of the greatest figure in human history—God but also man, sinless but fully alive, pure but with profound depths, the Judge of the world but with bottomless compassion, the fulfilment of all Jewish hopes but with a global appeal, a man in time but a man for all times. We need a Hero with heart-melting kindness yet steely determination. We need him blasting the self-righteous and befriending sinners. We need sublime ethical teaching to fall from his lips—the kind that builds civilisations. We need extraordinary miracles from him—the kind that would have been noticed (and could therefore be contradicted) by the generation to which you're writing. We need a credible narrative arc whereby he remains impeccably righteous but is nonetheless condemned as a blasphemer. And we need it all to stand up to scrutiny: scriptural, theological, geographic, linguistic, literary and historical. It needs to be believable both near and far, now and later, for those who've lived through these times and for all generations to come. Got it? Now get to work!”

This is why Jordan Peterson finds it so difficult to believe that “human beings invented this unbelievably preposterous story”. It is, in his words, an “impossible” task. When you read the Gospels for yourself, you begin to ask, along with Bible scholar Peter Williams, “Which

genius comes up with this?”¹⁶⁰ There is genius here. There is enough genius in the Jesus story to remake the world. But we need to ask: does the genius reside in the authors, or have the authors basically reported the genius of their Hero, Jesus? Both options are somewhat “miraculous”, but one of them involves a Miracle Maker who can explain the feat.

LIFE FROM THE DEAD

Let’s review where we’ve been so far. From Genesis onwards “the victory of the Victim” has been predicted. According to the prophecies, the promised one would defeat evil at great cost to himself. Then Jesus shows up in the middle of history as “the Lamb of God”—the willing Victim to be sacrificed for our sins. The rest of the New Testament proclaims the unlikely victory of this Victim. But there’s one more stop on our rapid tour of the Scriptures.

The Bible ends with a heavenly vision of a “Lamb, looking as if it had been slain”, on the throne of the universe (Revelation 5:6). When taken literally, the image is absurd, obviously, but such is the style of Revelation, the Bible’s final book. It uses pictorial language to present its vision of reality—both what is now and what is yet to come. Once you understand the representations, the meaning is understood. Jesus is “the Lamb at the centre of the throne” (7:17). He is the Victim who, *because he was sacrificed*, is at the heart of the Bible’s understanding of God. He is the Ruler of heaven and earth. And the promise of Revelation

160 Peter J. Williams & Bart Ehrman, *The Story of Jesus: Are the Gospels Historically Reliable?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I. Accessed 1st November 2021.

is that this “Lamb” will end up being worshipped by “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language” (v 9).

These are absolutely extraordinary beliefs, and it’s hard to decide which of them is the most extraordinary: that the one sacrificed on the cross should be identified as God; that he has triumphed *through* his bloody sacrifice; or that the whole world will come to see the glory of the bloodied God? The tiny Jesus movement of the 1st century embraced every aspect of this “unbelievably preposterous story”, to use Peterson’s phrase, and yet it “has stretched into every atom of culture”. The triumph of the Jesus-movement has defied all human expectations.

Whatever your views about miracles, everyone must grapple with an extraordinary “life-from-the-dead” occurrence in the 1st century. No one who had seen Jesus’ followers on the day after his death—dejected, scared, leaderless and hiding for fear of the authorities—would have expected their movement to shape history in the way that it has. Something was unleashed on the world 20 centuries ago such that, from an ignominious death, life has burst out.

A scientific analogy may help. Physicists first theorised about a Big Bang because they observed an expanding universe. It made them wonder about the origins of the expansion, and they reckoned that, at some point in the past, there was cosmic inflation, a force unleashed, a “Big Bang”.

This book has been observing a different kind of expansion—the expansion of the Jesus revolution which

has “stretched into every atom of culture”. If we trace it back to its origins, we come to the 1st century. Something happened. An incredible power was unleashed: a primal force. And Christians put a name to this “Big Bang”. They claim, in line with the Old and New Testaments, that it was the resurrection of Jesus that birthed the expansion we have witnessed. The Victim has been victorious over the course of history because the Victim was victorious *in* history: three days after his crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead. The tomb was empty; his followers reported encounters with him; and the period of history we have surveyed in this book was set in motion.

The resurrection of Jesus is undeniably a miracle. But it’s not a miracle that adds to the absurdity of your world. The resurrection explains what would otherwise be even more absurd. It says, “There’s expansion because there was an explosion”—the explosion of Christ bursting the bonds of death and inviting the world into his triumph. To embrace the miracle is not to embrace nonsense. In fact, it’s a way to make sense of life.

Resurrection explains why the Jesus movement did not die when he did. Resurrection explains why the Jesus movement continued its unlikely growth through many deadly trials. Resurrection explains why the Victim has come to be Victor. Resurrection explains why, far from being a tragedy, the cross has represented healing and hope. Resurrection explains why the pattern of all great stories—and the pattern of the meaningful life—is triumph *through* sacrifice. Most of all, resurrection explains Jesus. It explains why the one famous for his death has been encountered by billions as the one most fully alive.

Everyone is confronted with an absurdly improbable event: Christianity rose to life to have dominion over the world. Christians say, *We have an explanation: Christianity rose to life because Christ rose to life.* And if you start leaning towards the Jesus explanation, then you can embrace the most wonderful truths:

- that the world is loved, and loved to death;
- that such love is the very essence of who God is;
- that behind the history you witness is a History Maker who can be trusted;
- that above the values you prize is a person who embodies them;
- that beneath the values you violate is the mercy to forgive you; and...
- that beyond the death you must die is the life he has pioneered: resurrection.

Unquestionably these are extraordinary ideas to embrace. But then, all ordinary ideas are off the table. We live in an utterly extraordinary world. We are the heirs of a wholly improbable history. It's a case of "choose your miracle". And if you are at all attracted to the Jesus miracle, read on for some final words of advice. If you follow them, you may just find yourself saying, "I'm amazed at my own belief, and I don't understand it".