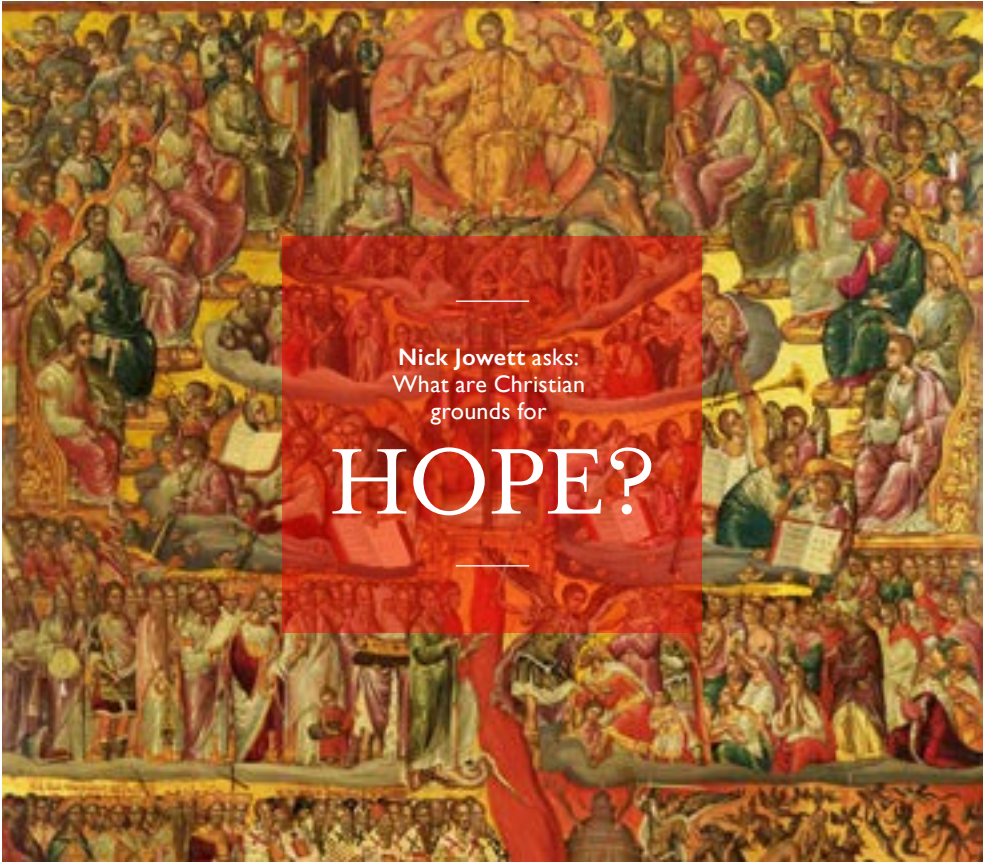


SUMMER 2026

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

FEATURES, COMMENTARY AND REVIEWS FROM MODERN CHURCH



Nick Jowett asks:
What are Christian
grounds for

HOPE?

Learning
from
the Past

Terry Drummond

The Lively Passion
of Jenkins' Belief
in an Involved God

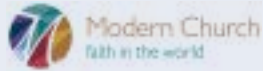
Book review by Tom Butler

Articulating
a 'God' Beyond
Existence

Ian K Duffield

MODERNCHURCH.ORG.UK





General Secretary
Alison Webster
gensec@modernchurch.org.uk

Administrator
Nic Tall
office@modernchurch.org.uk
0845 345 1909

Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology. Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England, we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Editor
Anthony Woollard
signsofthetimes
@modernchurch.org.uk
01789 204923

Book Reviews Editor
Terry Drummond
terry.drummond@hotmail.com

CONTRIBUTORS

John Binks
Retired Priest in the Diocese of Leeds

Tom Butler
Former Bishop of Southwark

Matt Drummond
Vicar of the Joint Benefice of St Francis of Assisi,
and St Mary's West Wickham

Terry Drummond
Signs of the Times Book Reviews Editor

Ian K Duffield
Retired Anglican Priest and UTU Director of Research

Nick Jowett
Retired Anglican Priest in the Diocese of Sheffield

EDITORIAL



Anthony Woollard
Editor

“THEREFORE WE HAVE HOPE”

“God is as he is in Jesus – therefore we have hope.” A simple but memorable quote from one of the less-remembered British theologians of the later 20th century, David Jenkins, who died about ten years ago.

This edition includes a review of a recent book by one of our regular contributors, Richard Truss, on Jenkins’ theological principles. At one stage in his career, his consecration as Bishop of Durham, he was a very controversial figure, pilloried in particular for alleged disbelief in the Resurrection as a physical historical event, as well as for some interventions in contemporary politics.

Truss shows that Jenkins’ understanding of the relationship between the Divine and public history was a great deal more sophisticated than his detractors could recognise. He

was by no means an agnostic about the reality of God, nor a thorough-going existentialist like some of his contemporaries. He wrote about the ‘pattern’ of God-in-Christ as the overarching reality in all things, cutting across the division between ‘religion’ and ‘the secular’ but also going far beyond narrow fundamentalism and historicism. Influenced by Bonhoeffer and other questioning mid-20th-century theologians, he yet had a remarkably “orthodox” reverence for the formularies of the faith. In that sense he was a great reconciler, of a sort so desperately needed again today.

Nick Jowett’s article below illustrates some of the ambiguities in ‘Christian hope’ or indeed hope of any kind. I suspect that Jenkins would have had much sympathy with the ‘realism’ of Jowett’s *continued* >

Signs of the Times is published in February, May, August and November. It provides news and information about Modern Church and offers members an opportunity to communicate with each other in print. We welcome articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying images. Articles published do not necessarily reflect a Modern Church perspective – in keeping with our commitment to liberal theology we believe that other views should be heard. Send material to the editor by 28th December, 28th March, 28th June or 28th September. Articles should not exceed 1,000 words. We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).



Printed on FSC® certified environmentally-friendly paper from sustainably managed forests and other controlled sources. Please recycle after use.

Cover image:
The Last Judgement by Georgios Klontzas
Wikimedia Commons



TAYLOR FLOWE/UNSPLASH

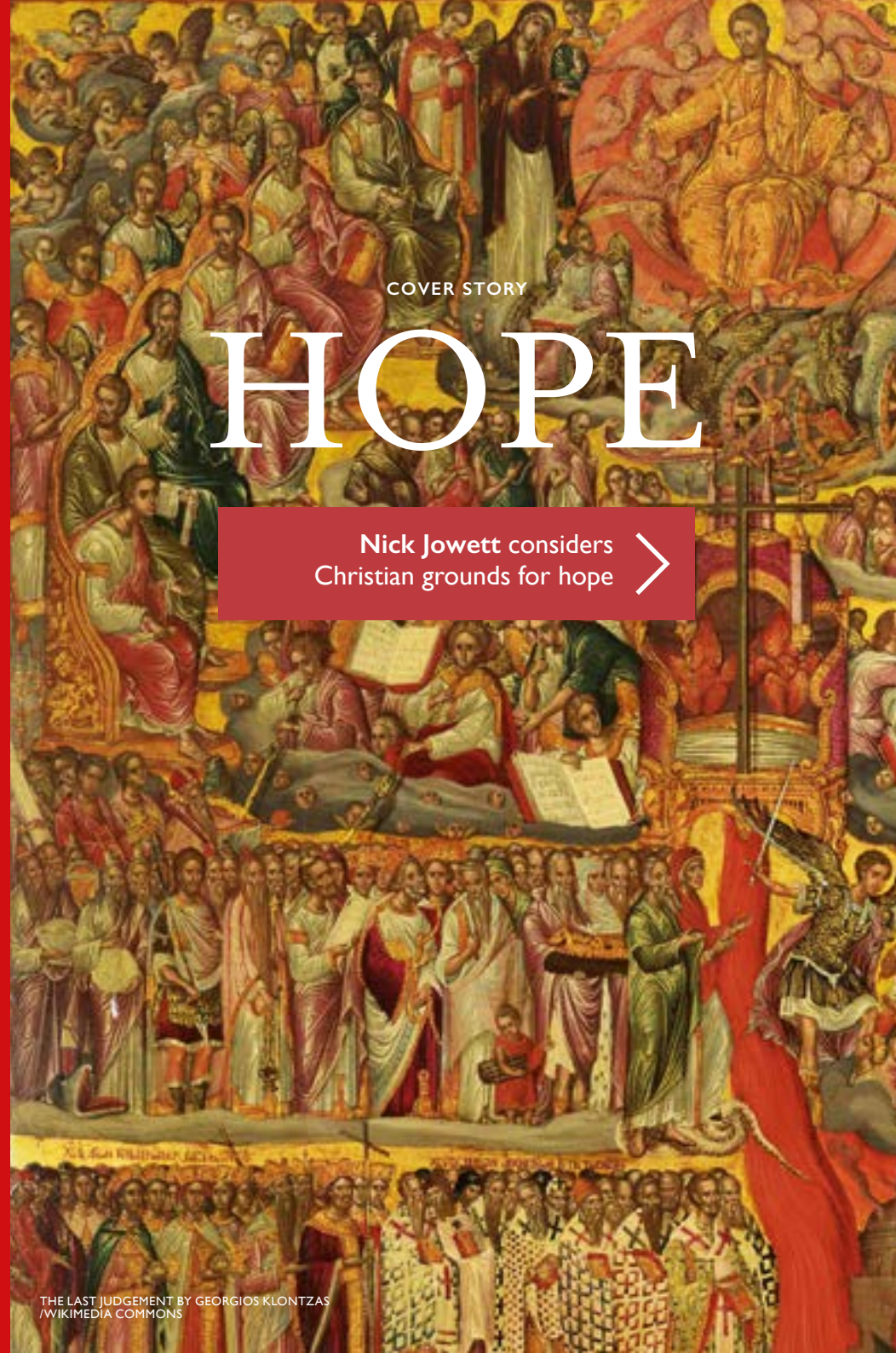
Continued from page 3

approach, but might have wanted to say just a little more about the Divine “pattern.” Some of the other reviews, about ‘God-talk’ and about the relationship between the everyday world and quantum theory, the relativity of time and all that, are also relevant. And as myself one of Jenkins’s former students, I am pretty sure that he would have been delighted to read them and to know that his work was being carried on.

Finally, Terry Drummond’s article about the General Synod debate on working class vocations raises some interesting issues which I am sure would have challenged Jenkins. The C of E is undoubtedly a rather ‘middle-class’ institution. But recent debates in the Press on readiness for primary school perhaps remind us that ‘class’ is a contested category. To lump together as ‘working class’ those whose background has simply been lacking in educational opportunity, and those whose

...recent debates in the press on readiness for primary school perhaps remind us that ‘class’ is a contested category. To lump together as ‘working class’ those whose background has simply been lacking in educational opportunity, and those whose upbringing has been inherently rather dysfunctional in terms of what is today demanded by society, may not be helpful.

upbringing has been inherently rather dysfunctional in terms of what is today demanded by society, may not be helpful. But it is evident that there are groups outwith the ‘A-level cohort’ which are under-represented in our congregations and clergy. How we mitigate this raises many questions, not only about ecclesiastical culture but about wider issues in society. As an analyst of social inequalities, Jenkins might well have offered wisdom on such matters.



COVER STORY

HOPE

Nick Jowett considers
Christian grounds for hope





Christians are, I think, confused about hope. Some of those confusions were evident at the Modern Church Annual Conference, as reflected in Alison Webster's article in the Spring edition of this newsletter.

What are the grounds for hope? I think we need to admit more honestly that, at a secular level (which includes a Christian level), there are no solid grounds for hope, because the future always remains completely unknown. There is simply no way of knowing beyond doubt whether tomorrow and the day after will bring something better or something worse.

Further, when we try to make a judgement on history to the present-day, it would be a brave person who would claim to know, in spite of the many wonderful developments in science, technology, arts and ethics, whether the balance of good and evil in the world has ever shifted. In any case, see the first point above: we can't know about tomorrow.

Secular myth

And yet a lot of Christians seem to have signed up to a secular myth of progress. Through the long years of post-war national 'peace,' with violence and disturbance usually taking place somewhere else, the idea of progress has continued to attract but also come under great pressure. We have become a nation of armchair news addicts, constantly taking the global political temperature, feeling that 'we ought to be better than



PRISCILLA DU PREEZ/JUNSPASH

The hope of the New Testament is directed towards the final eschatological actions of God – the Parousia, judgement, a new heaven and a new earth – and the repeated demand is that believers should be ready for that with their life in order, not that they could ever build their way towards it with ever more utopian orders of society.

this by now' but longing for 'signs of hope.' The dismal catalogues of Sunday intercessions tend to push the mood down further.

'Building of the kingdom'

This myth of progress is evident in some of the ideas reported in the Modern Church conference. If we can do some acts of kindness or witness to a better kind of community, it will contribute to the 'building of the kingdom,' create better communities for tomorrow and become a source of hope for people. Doing good works is clearly fine and right – but it can't shift the dial on the question of hope, because tomorrow always remains unknown, and there is still a strong likelihood that the good done will be balanced by evil committed elsewhere. We cannot 'enact hope'.

Christian hope is, of course, an important factor in our faith, but does it have any direct link with good works and trying to make *continued >*



We cannot grasp what might still be to come, but the very vastness of that perspective means that our vision – and our hope – need never be closed off.

Continued from page 7

the world a better place? The hope of the New Testament is directed towards the final eschatological actions of God – the Parousia, judgement, a new heaven and a new earth – and the repeated demand is that believers should be ready for that with their life in order, not that they could ever build their way towards it with ever more utopian orders of society. Preachers have for centuries now wrestled with the non-appearance of the apocalypse, so it's become a very remote factor. Hence, I believe, the creation of the kingdom by small projects and increments has largely taken over as the main source of hope.

Christian grounds

So what, finally, are Christian grounds for hope? I think there are two. The central one has to be the resurrection, the transforming gift from beyond the end of Jesus' life, the event that did engender a massive hope. The other is a justifiable trust

in a benign creator-sustainer: an awareness of the freedom and openness of the universe, the sense that there is so much potential inherent in it – the everyday possibility of something new, something even beyond our human canons of good and evil. Our sense of time is, of course, puny and pathetic over against the aeons of the past and possibly of the future. We cannot grasp what might still be to come, but the very vastness of that perspective means that our vision – and our hope – need never be closed off. If those two things are taken together, we can live in the broadest possible hope.

Doing the works of the kingdom is vital as part of our unceasing eschatological 'readiness' and our stewardship of the earth, but for anything that is truly worthy of the word 'hope,' we can only look to God.

Nick Jowett is a retired Anglican priest in the Diocese of Sheffield.



Learning from the Past

Terry Drummond takes a look back at his career, to answer the working class vocations debate

The February General Synod included a debate on the importance of working class vocations and the lack of them in the contemporary Church of England. Reading the reports I had a sense of déjà vu. I was called to ministry in the late 1960s, a working class boy who left school at 15 without a single O-level, though I did achieve one in Religious Knowledge through night school.

It was my understanding that for someone like me that there were two alternatives: pre-theological education or the Church Army. I took the latter course, though it must be said that I in no way reflected its Evangelical foundation. The simple truth was that it accepted

individuals with a vocation.

Others of my generation took the way of pre-theological education.

Talking to a friend who followed that route and who later gained a PhD and supervised, over the years, a number of other students, we both agreed that the Church of England had lost sight of models of training that worked. Sadly lost in a period of over 50 years. In 2026 the discussion was a question that had a solution in the late 1960/70s.

The question I was left with was one of do we ever learn from our past?

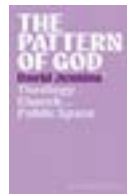
The Revd Dr Terry Drummond was awarded his Doctorate in August 2025 – a case of it's never too late!



The Lively Passion of Jenkins' Belief in an Involved God

Some years ago I was sitting next to David Jenkins at the back of a lecture theatre when we were listening to someone giving a talk. Jenkins was constantly muttering to himself, arguing with what was being said, until he seemed to reach a threshold of impatience and he was on his feet interrupting the speaker. What struck me, however, was that his public utterance was not as profound as his earlier private mutterings.

I thought of that incident when reading Richard Truss's stimulating book, *The Pattern of God: David Jenkins' Theology in Church and Public Space*, because the book makes it clear that Jenkins' theology was far more profound than his description in 1984 of the Resurrection as being 'more than a conjuring trick with bones' – a colourful phrase which enraged both senior clerics and politicians. It's ironic that this memorable phrase came from



Richard Truss
The Pattern of God
Sacristy Press, 2026

the lips of a theologian who, when he was with the World Council of Churches had written, "All our theologizing must be characterized by an openness through which we can hear not so much what we say but how we are heard." Truss's book digs deep into Jenkins'

thought and demonstrates that its origins fit within the broad stream of Anglican social theology combined with the disruptive passion of liberation theology which, when brought together by Jenkins, Truss maintains, bring particular insights to bear on the short comings of Church and Society, both in Jenkins' time and today.

Truss's book affirms that at the heart of Jenkins' theological legacy is his belief in the personal, incarnate and dynamic presence of God – the one he calls "the transcendence in the midst," or more pithily in his book, 'The Contradiction of Christianity' – "Jesus is the way God works." To believe in the God

of Jesus Christ necessarily means to believe in an involved, caring, continually creative and purposeful God, a God who transcends his transcendence so that he can stand in.

Jenkins' analogy is that of God as the artist who can somehow incorporate the contingent events of history including the mistakes and imperfections, into a greater work of art, an analogy in which God becomes reactive to, and is some sense radically dependent upon, what has been made, and there is a genuine openness and unpredictability about the future.

This 'pattern' is both retrieved from the past and rediscovered and reinterpreted afresh in our own situation. Thereby faith becomes a living and vibrant adventure, rather than a backward looking and doomed attempt to return to the supposed certainties of yesteryear.

In 2006, some eight years after his retirement as Bishop of Durham, his local vicar banned Jenkins from preaching in his local church for swearing whilst preaching. Jenkins admitted doing this but said, "The main reason for people not believing in God is the behaviour of people who do believe in God. I am fed up with the disgraceful quarrelling among Anglicans when they should be addressing world questions. I suppose there was a bit of anger and swearing but I get worked up in the pulpit and I get quite lively. Dogmatism is destroying the reasonableness and realism of religion."

Truss' book follows Jenkins' path as a college chaplain at Oxford,

working for four years with the World Council of Churches, six years at the William Temple Foundation, followed by five years as Professor of Theology at the University of Leeds, and then, for ten years as Bishop of Durham, including his intervention in the 1984/5 miners' strike. He became identified with opposition to the policies of the Thatcher and Major governments and subsequently was a critic of New Labour. He argued that what these governments shared was a dogmatic faith in the market which had many pseudo-religious elements to it.

Throughout this varied journey, the book well reflects Jenkins's lively passion and his belief that God is active and involved in every aspect of human life from the personal to the socio-political. He maintained that "about everything we say or do we must resolutely ask and rigorously answer the question: what has this to do with God and the world?" This book does just that, and this reviewer is bound to agree with Truss' conclusion that to read Jenkins today is to realize that he can still function as a 'cuckoo in the nest' disturbing both the comfortably assured and the despondent with a larger vision of God and humanity, one which impels action and worship.

– Tom Butler

The Right Revd Tom Butler
is the former Bishop of Southwark,
1998-2010

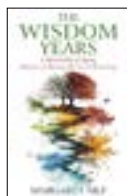
Silf Reassesses the Value of Our Later Years

Margaret Silf's new book brings us her reflections on the spiritual aspects of the ageing process and gives us means of looking at the physical, emotional and spiritual changes that occur as we grow older with an eye to improving our overall spiritual health.

Targeted at those who are approaching or past the age of retirement, she examines these key aspects with a wide variety of stories drawn from different faiths, traditions and continents. These, in turn, illustrate her theme that these changes can provide the basis for positive improvement in all aspects of our health as well as bringing benefit to our families, communities and nations.

Throughout, she adopts a light, sometimes wry, approach and deals with potentially difficult and sometimes intimate areas of

This book has things to say on many of the issues facing 'the elders' as she calls them – isolation, independence, limitations, legacy and particularly dying.



Margaret Silf
The Wisdom Years, A Spirituality of Ageing: Reflection and Ripening, Harvest and Homecoming
DLT, 2025

life with her own wisdom and sensitivity. Each chapter concludes with 'Pause for Thought,' an opportunity to consider a list of questions which could form the basis of several discussion sessions with people in the target age range.

Though not specifically Christian in character, Silf introduces illustrations and descriptions of key Christian concepts and beliefs alongside those of other faiths and traditions. This makes the book of use to both those with a faith position and those without.

This book has things to say on many of the issues facing 'the elders' as she calls them – isolation, independence, limitations, legacy and particularly dying. She tackles these issues head on and gives opportunities for readers to reassess the value of their later years in a positive and relaxed manner. This is a valuable resource for the general reader and for those whose ministry includes the elderly in whatever capacity.

–John Binks

The Revd John Binks is a retired priest in the Diocese of Leeds

Articulating a 'God' Beyond Existence

This book of philosophical theology is about "one idea:" that God does not "exist," because God is "no thing," ie. not an object within existence (p.59). Therefore, 'grammatically', there is a problem using the word "God," as it sounds like "a personal name," of "an individual being with certain characteristics" (p.7) that exists like other things exist.

This is not a novel idea. Back in the 1950s, Paul Tillich was so exercised by the misleading nature of the word 'God' to talk about Ultimate Reality that he proposed a public moratorium on the word. Not surprisingly, he discovered that you couldn't do without the word. His ideas were influential on Bishop John Robinson's famous book, *Honest to God* (1963), where he adopted Tillich's proposal that instead of 'God' it was better to talk about the 'Ground of Being', which avoids treating 'God' as a being that exists. Márkus' book takes the "one idea" through history (p.8), although he does not mention Tillich, probably because of his Catholic orientation (he is a former Dominican friar indebted to Fr Herbert McCabe, to whom his book is dedicated).

So, this is a book on God-talk:



Gilbert Márkus
God as Nothing
DLT, 2025

a topic previously well covered by Anglican theologians like Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* and John Macquarrie, *God-Talk*. But what this book does is to sustain a single argument about

'God as Nothing,' as not an object or an item existing within the universe. He acknowledges that we can't, in practice, avoid talking about God: "Of course, we have ways of talking about God which make him sound like another person... but they are only images" – even if we're forced to use them (p.115). Underlying all this is a key perception: "God is not one of the things which exist, but is rather the reason that anything exists rather than nothing existing at all." (p.132), which some readers will recognise as a re-working of a classic statement.

He begins by discussing the stories of creation in Genesis. He provides good detail on the Mesopotamian epics, stressing that the Bible is not copying them, but rather providing something of a "parody" or "subversion" of these predecessors (pp.27ff). However, I think he could have emphasised that, in the past, too much was made of the parallels, whereas what was significant, biblically and theologically, was the differences from the ancient myths, eg. one God as the Creator of all things that, as *continued* >

Continued from page 13

he argues, led to a “radical monotheism”, where “believing in God actually frees us from believing in gods ... any gods” (p.33). He also confronts the fact that the Bible talks about God as if ‘he’ were a thing: a person, a god, even though no images are allowed (pp.43ff); but points to the radical idea that the true image of God is fellow human beings; and raises the ethical question: Does “the word ‘God’ mean anything at all, unless you do justice” (p.49)? In this he’s influenced by the Mexican José Porfiro Miranda’s *Marx and the Bible* (ET 1974). Following the prophets, Márkus seems opposed to worship and the cult (pp.56f, 59), because “justice and mercy is the defining issue” (p.62), as if they were mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, he provides some good reflections on Scripture, philosophically and grammatically (pp.66, 71, 74), plus a reflection on “how God-talk works” (p.79).

In the following chapters, Márkus discusses, in a very readable way, various important theological voices within the Christian tradition, such as Augustine (Ch.5), and especially Aquinas (Ch.7) — who appears strongly throughout the book, and is described as the book’s “heart” (p.133) — as he pursues his one idea, philosophically and theologically.

Márkus ends the book with 24 “Refractions,” ie. brief excursions that shine the light of the one idea through various prisms. This is an interesting and novel idea, even if the quality of them varies. However,

deciding to end the book controversially with the convoluted language of post-modern French philosophy appears strange. This is no mistake, as No. 24 is longer than any other Refraction, is deliberately placed last, and is explicitly “in honour of the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida” (my emphasis). Although Márkus finds similarities with his project, Derrida’s ‘activist’ philosophy is endlessly engaged with “disman- tling,” “questioning,” “exposing” all language, “every statement” (p.248). Whereas this book deals with the problem of God-talk, Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ agenda is about all language — endlessly suspicious “of culture, of institutions, of legal systems” (p.249), ad absurdum. If nothing else, this is confusing and distracts from the book’s value. It is an unnecessary and distracting ending.

That said, the rest of the book is worth reading and would be useful to anyone new to faith that was interested in philosophical theology (and perhaps an atheist or two), for they would experience exposure to the important tradition of God as beyond existence, perhaps better, as the Ground of Being or Being-Itself.

— Ian Duffield

Revd Dr Ian K Duffield is a life-long member of Modern Church, a retired Anglican Priest and UTU’s Director of Research

Theology Meets Theoretical Physics in Haught’s Search for the Divine

To misquote the Church Father Tertullian, “What has Ulm (the birthplace of Einstein) to do with Jerusalem?” What has theoretical physics to do with the life of God? It is an important question, and as Haught points out in the introduction to his book, one that is in need of careful consideration.

In the late 1990s I asked a similar question. At that time I was working as a cinema projectionist in North Lincolnshire, and between changing reels was reading Stephen Hawking’s famously impenetrable *A Brief History of Time*. Being young and naïve I believed that I had understood more than I probably did, a fact made clear to me when I tried rereading it in my early 40s. However, one point remains clear, that theoretical physics, whether it relates to the cosmic meta, as Einstein’s theories do, or to both the meta and the quantum as Stephen Hawking’s do, has much to say to theology and Christian belief.

What for instance is the nature of time? Einstein shows that time is relative, and that the faster a body moves, the slower time will



John F Haught,
*God After Einstein:
What's really going
on in the Universe?*
Yale University Press,
2022

flow, likewise with proximity to a large mass such as a planet or blackhole, proximity slows down time, and with a black hole time ceases to flow at all. When we link this to

2 Peter 3.8 (NRSVA) where we read “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day,” we can see that Einstein has come in some way to scratch the

surface of divine reality. Of course, as a theologian and philosopher Haught’s writing and perception runs much deeper than this, but it demonstrates that science might have much to say to theology.

Then there are ideas such as quantum entanglement, the theory that two particles though separated by space and time may act in unison with each other. Whilst Einstein had little time for Quantum Physics, famously stating that “God does not play dice,” science now shows that God is quite adept when it comes to dice play. Indeed what might Quantum Entanglement have to tell us about predestination? Can such a connected universe allow for individual free choice and movement?

Unfortunately,

continued >

Continued from page 15

scientific theorising is very complicated, linking in higher mathematics and thinking often well outside the three spatial dimensions and the fourth temporal dimension which make up our human perception. Which is why a book like Haught's is so important. Theology can sometimes get stuck in responding to yesterday's questions and last century's theological problems. Take for instance the Church of England's continued problems with discussions over human sexuality: whilst society has pretty much come to the conclusion as to their being a diversity in how people understand, experience and express their sexuality (what we might describe in terms of theoretical physics as being multiple dimensions of experience). The Church is caught up in trying to decide what constitutes a valid expression of sexuality using only one (or perhaps two) dimensional axis. Science and society have moved forward, the Church remains stuck in a 'slough of despond' of its own engineering.

The heavens, both the cosmic meta and the quantum have much to tell us about God, and we need theologian philosophers like Haught to unpack this for us. Not that this a beachside read, it is rather one that requires (and indeed rewards) study and hard work. But then in considering Einstein's work we are taking forward the call placed upon us by

the Psalmist to consider and study creation in Psalm 8.3-5: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them. Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour." And what Haught does at the top of each chapter is to quote first from Einstein then from the Nicene Creed, the Church's gold standard statement on the nature of the Godhead, linking modern theoretical physics to the Vincentian canon's statement about the nature of orthodox belief.

Another Anglican Priest and theoretical physicist who did this was John Polkinghorne. In an obituary I read of his it was said that on a visit to see him later in his life he had by his table both the latest scientific journals, but also a well-thumbed copy of the Prayer Book. Here like Haught was a man who sought to understand not just God and theoretical physics, but to see what one could teach us about the other. Ulm and Jerusalem are much closer than we might first assume, and we don't need a theoretical worm hole to connect the two together.

— *Matt Drummond*

Revd Matt Drummond is Vicar of the Joint Benefice of St Francis of Assisi, and St Mary's West Wickham