

A fresh Christian apologetic for a WEIRD age

The Air We Breathe: How we all came to believe in freedom, kindness, progress, and equality

Glen Scrivener

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Let me get straight to the point. This gripping book is apologetics gold: historically informed, cogently argued, relevant and contemporary, and sparkles with interest from start to finish. It is certainly deserving of the many inside-cover commendations from various Christian movers and shakers. And not just believers, for British historian (and non-Christian) Tom Holland writes: “It is not necessary to be a Christian to appreciate the force of Glen Scrivener’s argument in this punchy, engaging, and entertaining book.”

Australian author Scrivener is an Anglican minister in southern England, a blogger, speaker, filmmaker, and director of a charity called *Speak Life*.¹ The book is written particularly with non-believers in mind, both those without any religious affiliation and those who have moved on from Christian roots and influences; it is also aimed at Christians, and worth every bit of your time. Numerous historical and contemporary cultural references reveal the author’s wide reading, from Thomas Paine to Terry Pratchett, Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Jordan Peterson, Friedrich Nietzsche to Family Guy, Richard Dawkins to Rowan Williams, and many more.

Why *The Air We Breathe*? The explanation is given fully and engagingly in

the introduction but is essentially as follows: our beliefs and intuitions are like the oxygen of our vital breath, all-pervasive, obvious, universal, but largely unacknowledged and taken for granted. In 10 chapters and a ‘Final Words’ section, the author makes a compelling case that needs to be heard and heeded.

So what is Scrivener’s main thesis? I can do no better than quote the publisher’s own succinct statement:

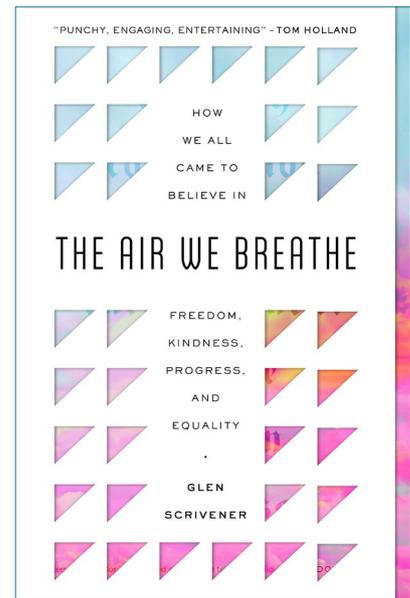
“Today in the west, many consider the church to be dead or dying. Christianity is seen as outdated, bigoted and responsible for many of society’s problems. This leaves many believers embarrassed about their faith and many outsiders wary of religion. But what if the Christian message is not the enemy of our modern Western values, but the very thing that makes sense of them?”²

From chapter two onwards, the author builds his case, and this review will follow the chapter headings, highlighting just a few points from each.

Equality

Scrivener begins by quoting Israeli historian and best-selling author Yuval Noah Harari, noting that he buys wholesale into the disturbing evolutionary story of *Homo sapiens* coming to dominate his environment through ruthlessness and greed.^{3,4} Yet Harari also has plenty to say about human rights; he admits that God and the human rights story are intertwined.

Unlike ancient creation myths, however, Genesis 1:1 is “a different story, with a different God and a very different outcome for the valuation of humans” (p. 51). Scrivener faithfully outlines the Genesis narrative while



bypassing discussion as to its historicity, or whether the creation days are literal or not. He simply states:

“... day after day emptiness is filled, potential is formed, chaos is ordered. The heavens, the earth and the waters are commanded, and in obedience to the word of God, they shine, they sprout and they teem” (p. 53).

Throughout the book, the teaching of Genesis is positively upheld, and its relevance clearly brought out. By contrast, Darwinian evolution seems to be cast in a negative light. A hint that Scrivener may hold some sort of ‘old-earth’ creation view is his description of mankind’s creation in Genesis 2 as a ‘poetic vision’ (p. 55).

Everything else he writes about Genesis 1–3 in the book affirms the distinctness of the biblical record—contrary to those neo-evangelicals who see Genesis as a reworked Ancient Near East myth. The image of God in man is affirmed, “Then Adam and Eve, the first humans, rebel against that voice—the command of God—and chaos ensues” (p. 56). There is no embarrassment about affirming Genesis to non-Christian readers. After all, this account underpins what people



Figure 1. The values people cherish in the largely post-Christian West are nevertheless thoroughly Christian ones (image by Jean-Baptist Burbaud, free use).

in our increasingly ‘woke’ culture care deeply about (figure 1):

“... the God story and the equality story stand or fall together. If we feel that life is sacred, that every human possesses an inviolable dignity and equality, ... then we are standing on particularly biblical foundations. There is a thread running from Genesis through the New Testament to our 21st-century humanist convictions” (pp. 58–59).

Compassion

Arch-Darwinist Richard Dawkins raised a furore when he alleged it was a moral responsibility to abort babies with Downs Syndrome.⁵ In any case, logically, compassion is antithetical to evolution; pity is a poison within his worldview. Likewise, Scrivener shows that Nietzsche consistently applied the enforcement of natural selection (which he believed had led to human existence) to immorality and ethics. It’s no wonder Nietzsche was avowedly anti-Christian.

In stark contrast, the author provides a wonderful description of the Cross work of Jesus, who was ‘compassion incarnate’. An obvious outcome is that Christians show compassion. “But there’s nothing natural about this. Nature is ‘red in tooth and claw’, as the poet Tennyson put it” (p. 74). It’s contrary to alternative worldviews that have dominated history, not least evolutionism. It is why, in some countries, we refer to government officials as ‘ministers’, the old English word for servant—like Britain’s Prime Minister—whereas the ancient Romans called their rulers ‘gods’. Compassion and ministering to others are laudable, but not logical, outcomes of human societies where Christianity was never embraced.

Consent

In our salacious age, promiscuity is considered a basic freedom, yet sexual abuse and rape are legislated against, and prostitution is ordinarily frowned upon. The ancients had few of our sexual scruples. In licentious Rome, a visit to one of the numerous brothels cost the equivalent of a loaf of bread. However, “Christianity brought an earthquake in sexual morality” (p. 87). Jesus’ teaching often referred his hearers back to Genesis; e.g. that which concerns divorce and remarriage “represents the death of casual sex. It’s also the death of easy divorce” (Matthew 19:3–9).

What about those who remain single? “Christ holds chaste singleness in even higher regard. In evolutionary terms, such singleness is a dead end” (p. 92). But the Bible is not prudish, and sex *within* marriage is positively encouraged (1 Cor. 7:4–5). Such teaching was radical in the ancient world. It meant that “The Church became a place of dignity, protection, and provision for women” (p. 95).

And while sexual abuse and paedophilia are rightly condemned today, pre-Christianity things were very different. Sex with boys and girls was actually celebrated in ancient Greece, but Christians rightfully rebranded such pederasty (literally ‘love of children’) as *paidophthoros* (= destruction of children). In other words, “What the classical world called love, Christians called abuse” (p. 97). The reason most moderns deem those ancient behaviours as crooked is precisely because a straight standard exists; this Christian standard remains in our cultural DNA today.

Enlightenment

Scrivener charts the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity, the history of the church advancing and enlightening other cultures through its emissaries (missionaries)—much as Tom Holland details in his tour de force of a book, *Dominion*.⁶ The reason we moderns look down upon the misnamed Dark Ages (Medieval period) is that our culture is thoroughly shaped by Christianity. Yet enlightenment ideals already existed in Medieval times: “perhaps 50,000 books [by numerous classical authors] were copied and produced” in the 8th and 9th centuries (p. 118).

What of violence in the name of God? Not all supposedly Christian empire builders renounced the sword, it’s true. Some, like Charles the Great (Charlemagne, AD 742–814) were merciless. Yet many in earlier times believed that true enlightenment came through education and persuasion. The Crusades (1096–1229) and the Spanish Inquisition (1478–1834) were dreadful but were grotesque contradictions of biblical Christianity. In fact, says Scrivener, “If we are outraged by the Crusades ... that is *Christian* outrage we’re experiencing” (p. 115). And dreadful though the Spanish

Inquisition was, the documented deaths were eclipsed by ‘secular’ atrocities in recent centuries. During just three years of the Red Terror (1918–1921), the Bolsheviks executed 1,400 times as many people as died in several centuries of the Inquisition.⁷

As other historians have demonstrated, misconceptions abound about the ‘Dark Ages’. It was a period of terrific technological prowess (magnificent cathedrals, pipe organs, and clocks). There was an increasing recognition of human rights (e.g. the Gregorian Reforms of 1020–1055), universities were established (from the early 13th century onwards), and parliaments too. The Middle Ages were not barren, as many believe. Any idea that the Age of Reason (aka Enlightenment) began with shaking off Christian hegemony is a myth.

Science

Ingrained in our culture is the false notion that Christian religion is at war with science (the ‘conflict thesis’). Again, Scrivener does not shrink from affirming God’s divine prerogative in creation. Genesis 1:1, he says, shows “God is free. When He chooses to make the world, He shapes it by His own creative Voice so that it’s exactly as He wants it” (p. 132). Disappointingly, in rightly affirming God’s superintendence of the creation, he allows for deep time:

“There are regularities in the way the world works, and those regularities are reliable—they hold true both now and back in the Jurassic Age; both here and far away on Jupiter” (p. 133).

This fly in the ointment notwithstanding, all that follows is faithful to Genesis and related as if an entirely factual account.

The author talks of great thinkers, from Augustine to William of Ockham, to Isaac Newton (and many more). He affirms, as have many others,



Figure 2. Painting by John Trumbull (1756–1843) of the signing of the US Declaration of Independence, which advocated equal rights for all.

that science was birthed within medieval Christendom.⁸ And in the case of Galileo Galilei, it was not that the church invoked Scripture against science, rather “They backed a majority of scientists against a minority” (p. 141).⁹

Freedom

In 2020, in many countries, statues of many former dignitaries were vandalized and toppled; virtually no memorial was safe if the person was deemed to have had a shady past regarding slavery or racism. The US *Declaration of Independence* (figure 2) famously celebrated the rights of all, “But outside of a biblical foundation, no one in history—including the world’s greatest thinkers and moralists—has known about human rights” (pp. 151–152). It’s common knowledge that *Christians* strove to abolish the slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. Onetime slave Frederick Douglas (1817–1895) later became a great abolitionist and friend of Abraham Lincoln; without doubt, Douglas’ Christian faith informed his views. Similarly, Negro

Spiritual songs resonate with the Israelites’ bondage in Egypt *and* with a redemptive theme that owes much to the Gospel of Christ.

Far from condoning slavery by oppressors, Scripture patterned slaves for redemption. Thus, Jesus declared a Jubilee for all, opening the way for many to be freed from the darkness and bondage of sin (Luke 4:18–19). In 1842, slavery was dubbed ‘a crime against humanity’. Nevertheless, abolitionism was a *religious* movement because slavery was especially a crime against the Creator. Scrivener observes, “Now we live on this side of abolition, and our moral imaginations find it nearly impossible to leap backwards” (p. 166). Outcries against racial oppression are because we are breathing Christian air, albeit unacknowledged or disavowed by most.

Progress

Scrivener points out that progress sometimes has a dark side. Darwin proclaimed biological progress, Hegel, historical progress, Freud, psychological progress, and Marx, economic and political progress. The ugly fruit of such philosophies



Figure 3. A mural by Leonhard Lenz in a Berlin park depicting the death of George Floyd in May 2020; “I can’t breathe”, he told the policeman kneeling on him.

notwithstanding, Christian ideals run through them like veins in a blue cheese. But without a vertical reference (God unacknowledged), the desire for progress all too easily spawns violence. The 20th century was the most blood-stained in history, the ‘murder century’. Think of Stalin’s *Holodomor* (Ukrainian: murder by famine) and purge of tens of millions in the 1930s, or of Chairman Mao’s ‘Great Leap Forwards’ (1958–1962), where over 45 million died of overwork, starvation, or murder—not to mention the horrors of death camps like Auschwitz.

Post WWII, a moral standard was needed to establish the ‘self-evident’ moral truths so bespattered by the Nazis. As with slavery, those atrocities were deemed ‘crimes against humanity’ but few admitted they were crimes against God. If they were merely “crimes against humanity”, we have a dilemma, for humanity was on both sides (evil oppressors and their victims). Scrivener states pithily, “If we’re all squabbling apes, then there’s no transcendent *justice* in condemning Nazism” (p. 181). So what price progress?

“The sins we really care about are ‘ism’s’, especially racism and the treatment of minorities. The slurs that stick are the ones that end in ‘bigot’ and ‘-phobe’ This is the kind of moral sentiment we have come to: a mixture of secularised Christianity and post-war antifascism ...” (p. 183).

Secularism today, having fled past evils, now pursues values like rights, freedom, and progress, but divorces them from their source. This concurs with Tom Holland’s thesis in *Dominion*—without Christianity’s humanity-enhancing teaching about the image of God, the ruthless suppression of weaker minorities fits evolutionary logic:

“To believe that God had become man and suffered the death of a slave was to believe that there might be strength in weakness, and victory in defeat. Darwin’s theory, more radically than anything that previously had emerged from Christian civilization, challenged that assumption. Weakness was nothing to be valued. Jesus, by commending the meek and the poor over those better suited to the great struggle for existence, had set

Homo sapiens upon the downward path towards degeneration.

For eighteen long centuries, the Christian conviction that all human life was sacred had been underpinned by one doctrine more than any other: that man and woman were created in God’s image.”¹⁰

The Kingdom without the King

Black American George Floyd died at the hands of the police (May 2020; figure 3), a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic, sparking protests and unrest in the US and around the world. Floyd was quickly portrayed by many as a saint, even a Christ figure. There were communal acts of identification, even repentance; politicians, sports stars, and celebrities everywhere were ‘taking the knee’. All “these gestures, slogans and movements came together with a remarkable force ... [and] they are Christian in their source”, says the author (p. 189). “Whether people realise it or not, these culture wars involved devout believers hurling Bible verses at one another—they’ve just forgotten the references” (p. 190), to the detriment of society.

It is the same story with other contemporary debates. Transgender advocates want equality, compassion, and consent, but they divorce these from Christianity and recombine them differently. Equality becomes a radical individualism as people emphasize *rights* over institutions and community. Compassion risks becoming what sociologists have termed ‘competitive victimhood’, and perceived victim status is used to gain advantage. This leads to clashes between different minority groups—e.g. feminists versus trans-rights activists—so whose suffering takes precedence? Divorcing sexual consent from Christian values is a wrecking ball as far as marriage, family, and the wider community are concerned. As Scrivener points

out, “Consent is vital, but it is not a sufficient foundation for sexual ethics” (p. 194). Progressive secularization is not a sustainable strategy!

The WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) values upon which Scrivener’s book focuses are strongly believed by all, but people in Western society are making a hash of applying them in everyday life. Compared to the ancient world, equality, compassion, consent, enlightenment, science, freedom, and progress were given a makeover by Christianity, and these are dear to the hearts of modern people. As Scrivener says, “These are our creedal convictions, and, by and large, we are a society of believers” (p. 197). But even as people are straining to discard Christianity, they continue with their moralizing:

“If anyone blasphemes our WEIRD values ... we ‘cancel’ them—that is, we ostracise them socially and professionally. This is really a modern form of ‘excommunication’ for modern kinds of ‘heretics’” (p. 198).

And anyone can find themselves a target, especially, as the author wryly observes, with the turbo-charging of outrage made possible by social media.

In today’s ‘cancel culture’, there is plenty of guilt, but without grace, forgiveness is nowhere in sight! Scrivener is right on the money in noting that the denial of King Jesus, while trying to retain Christian ideals, brings judgment, not liberation:

“In order to pursue the kingdom without the King, we have had to dethrone the *person* of Christ and install abstract values instead. ... [But] Values can only judge you” (p. 200).

People need the Gospel of hope, so the author invites readers to consider how history will judge *them*—more especially how will *God* judge them? Wonderfully, Christ came not to police people’s morals so much as to heal

them, to cleanse and forgive needy, despondent human beings.

Choose your miracle

It is good to see that the author returns yet again to Genesis, this time to Genesis 3:15 in closing out the book, the prophesied redemption through the woman’s seed (a Saviour). He shows the unfolding of the promise in the pages of the Old Testament, not least the prophesies of Isaiah and Daniel. “No wonder messianic expectation was at fever pitch in the 1st century” (p. 211), because Israel was under the rule of Rome. Christ came, predicting the triumph of His kingdom, though via His death and Resurrection. Thus, the Jesus revolution fulfilled the Genesis promise.

But maybe the whole story was fabricated? Scrivener skilfully defends the Gospels and their accounts of Christ, and he does so in a highly original and compelling manner, demonstrating their sheer genius. The strong evangelistic approach is fresh, not hackneyed. Jesus, the History Maker, is the One behind the values so cherished by the West—He embodies them. In fact, Christ loved this world to death, pioneering life for all violators of those values through His Resurrection.

This is not a book which fizzles out towards the end. In its closing pages, Scrivener appeals in turn to the three categories of readers mentioned in the second paragraph of this review. It is refreshingly honest and very well executed. To Christians, he writes, “In all this, great wisdom is needed to discern the Christian-*ish* values of a WEIRD culture from true Christianity” (p. 230). Absolutely, and this book deserves to be very widely read.

References

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