

THE BULLETIN

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Biblical Christianity Upholds the Sanctity of Life and the Dignity of Women

This article is the third of five papers under the general heading of 'How Christianity Changed the World'. They are adapted from a series of talks given by the author at Word Alive in April 2019. She has given us permission to publish all five in this and subsequent issues of the Bulletin.

This series of articles offers some snapshots from history to demonstrate that the world has been changed immeasurably for the better because of the life and witness of Christ's followers. In this third article we see that Christians through history and Christians today are in the forefront of fighting to affirm the value of all human life and the dignity of women.

The Sanctity of Life

God the Giver of life

In Spring 2018, Perumalla Pranay, a Christian from the so called 'Dalit' caste married his childhood sweetheart, Amrutha in Andhra Pradesh, India. This cross-caste marriage meant that Amrutha was rejected by her higher caste family. Six months later she and her husband were delighted to find that she was expecting a baby. But on the way out of a hospital appointment near their home, Perumalla was hacked to death by contract killers hired by his father-in-law. The pavement was stained with the blood of this young husband, who was so looking forward to the birth of his first child.

Perumalla was killed because the caste system views Dalits as of lesser worth, and as possessing no dignity. Some believe that the scale of injustice and abuse caused by the caste system makes it one of the single most serious human rights issues in history.¹

But today in India, many Christians are in the forefront of offering Dalits hope and dignity, and the knowledge that they, along with all people, are made in the image of God.

Genesis 1:27 explains that human beings are distinct from the rest of creation. We bear the image of God. This wonderful truth lies behind the purpose of redemption, culminating in the Cross. Why would God be so determined to rescue us, at such an immense cost? Would he have given his own Son for something insignificant? Human beings have worth, derived from the intrinsic dignity of the one whose image we bear.²

God is the Creator and Giver of life. And the followers of Christ know that we are indeed 'our brother's keeper', called to care for and defend fellow human beings made in God's image. After the flood, God told Noah:

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

'Whoever sheds human blood,

by humans shall their blood be shed;

for in the image of God

has God made mankind...' (Genesis 9:5-6)

God's moral law summarised in the Ten Commandments is a perfect expression of his own moral character. The sixth commandment is 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13). John Ling writes:

Protection of human life is a recurring theme in Scripture. Uniquely in the created order it is only the lives of human beings that enjoy this special protection. The Sixth Commandment, 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13), stands out as a great beacon to protect all innocent human life. 'Innocent' here does not mean those

¹ M Woods, 'Telling a Better Story: how India's Christians are fighting for dignity for Dalits', All India Christian Council network, 4 September, 2018.

² John Ling, *When does Human Life Begin*, The Christian Institute, 8.

*'without sin', but those 'without harm'. Killing is permitted [in the Bible] in the cases of capital punishment, just wars and in self-defence, but killing of the innocent is strictly forbidden.*³

When King David was brought to deep repentance for the sin of murder, he confessed to God: 'Against you, you only have I sinned' (Psalm 51:4). How could he say that? He had wronged Uriah; he had wronged Bathsheba; he had wronged the baby who died. But who gave Uriah life? Who gave Bathsheba life? Who gave the baby life? It was God. David had despised God, the Giver of life.

Supremely, Christians affirm the dignity of all human life because God himself, in Christ, became flesh. Christ was incarnate, made flesh, from the moment of conception. As a single cell. If Jesus Christ was incarnate at conception, we too begin life at conception. God, the Giver of life, demands that human life, made in his image should be protected from conception to natural death.

The sanctity of life defended in the Early Church

Turning to the historical record, Christianity spread rapidly during the first three centuries in the face of opposition and persecution. There were probably no more than a few thousand Christians in 40 AD. By the third century, Christianity was growing at the rate of 40 per cent per decade. Some reckon that by 350 AD there were 33 million Christians in the Roman Empire out of a total population of 60 million.⁴

Sociologist Rodney Stark argues that a significant factor in that extraordinary growth was the Christian ethic of defending the sanctity of life, which (counter-intuitively to today's feminist thinking) worked for the protection of women as well.

Abortion was widely practised in Greco-Roman society; leading philosophers justified the practice. Plato argued that it should be used as a means of population control.⁵ As well as destroying the life of the child, it was very dangerous for the mother. Women were often forced into it by their masters (if they were slaves) or by their husbands.

Abortion was condemned by the early church and the church fathers, and by a series of church councils. This ethic of a respect for life saved countless unborn infants and their mothers. Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) mobilised Christians to help women who were facing unwanted pregnancies. He also helped stage public protests against the activities of the guild of abortionists, who sold aborted infant bodies to the manufacturers of beauty creams. He was just one of many Christians trying to save the unborn.⁶

Many pagan philosophers approved of infanticide (the killing of newborns, or their abandonment and exposure). It was commonly practised in Greco-Roman society, particularly if infants were weak, sick, disabled or female.

In the year 1 BC, a travelling worker in Egypt, wrote to his wife at home. She was expecting a baby. He wrote:

*Many greetings. Know that we are still in Alexandria. Don't be anxious. As soon as I receive my wages I will send them up to you. If – may you have good luck! - you should give birth, if it is a boy keep it. If it is a girl, throw it out. I cannot forget you. I beg you not to be anxious.*⁷

If it is a girl, throw it out! That reflected a widespread and nearly universally-accepted practice. During excavations of one Roman villa, archaeologists found numerous tiny bones in the sewer underneath the bathhouse – human bones of nearly a hundred infants who had been murdered and thrown into the sewer.⁸

³ *When does Human Life Begin?* 14.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 5.461.

⁶ AJ Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, 59.

⁷ JJ Johnstone, *Unimaginable: What Our World Would Be Like Without Christianity*, Bethany House, 2017, 25-6.

⁸ Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book that Made your World*, 302.

The early Christians opposed this. They rescued and cared for infants whenever they could.

Benignus of Dijon was a second-century Christian who lived in Southern France. He rescued unwanted babies – those surviving failed abortions as well as abandoned infants. He then cared for and protected them. But for that he was killed.⁹

Eventually, Christian influence prompted the Emperor Valentinian to outlaw infanticide and child abandonment in 374 AD.

It wasn't just infants who were regarded as expendable in the Roman Empire. Morally depraved emperors had no qualms about taking human life. Emperor Tiberius (ruled 14-37 AD) under whose reign Christ was crucified, loved to watch people being tortured; Emperor Caligula (37-41 AD) on one occasion arbitrarily killed every one who served in his palace. He enjoyed seeing human beings dragged through the streets with their bowels hanging out. He forced parents to witness the execution of their sons.¹⁰

In 313 AD, the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which for the first time gave Christianity legal status in the Roman Empire. Once Constantine was Emperor, he initiated social reforms such as the abolition of crucifixion and the emancipation of slaves as well as the discouragement of infanticide.¹¹

The violence and cruelty of gladiatorial shows is still remembered. The Roman Empire, at its height, covered 2.5 million square miles. Many defeated and subjected people were enslaved, and could be killed for the entertainment of citizens. The Colosseum in Rome, dedicated by Emperor Titus in 80 AD could seat 70,000 spectators. This huge venue, and others like it around the Empire, saw the deaths of thousands upon thousands of gladiators. The early Christians were of course sometimes condemned to death in the arena. But even during lulls in persecution they consistently spoke out against this barbarity and were absolutely forbidden to attend. Such games were banned in the Eastern Roman Empire by the Christian Emperor Theodosius by the end of the fourth century.

The last gladiatorial conquest took place in Rome in 404, after a military victory over the Goths. Gladiators fought furiously. As each one was wounded, the audience would signal whether they should be killed or not. Especially privileged people could descend into the arena to get a closer view of the dying agonies of the victims. But on this occasion, someone else forced his way down into the arena. A Christian called Telemachus from Asia had been moved to the depths of his soul when he saw thousands flocking to view the slaughter. He had entered the event not to enjoy the spectacle but to witness against it. 'In the name of Christ, stop!' he shouted, while attempting to separate two of the gladiators. The crowd was enraged at this challenge to their entertainment. Telemachus died amid a hail of stones and other missiles. But his work was accomplished at the moment he was struck down. His death turned the hearts of both the people and the Emperor. From the day Telemachus fell dead, no other fight of gladiators was ever held.¹²

The sanctity of all human life undermined today

Christianity introduced an ethic which regarded every human life as sacred, because we are made in the image of God. For 2000 years, Christianity has been the foundation for good medicine, promoting a culture of life which has protected us all.

But once a society rejects the belief that all human life has been created by God, with unique dignity because we are made in his image, the door is open to a utilitarian system of ethics which easily slips into thinking that the 'less fit' should be eliminated.

Today in a culture where 'absolute' morals are rejected, bioethics flails around in a morass of situation

⁹ *How Christianity Changed the World*, 153.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹ DL Severance, *Feminine Threads*, Christian Focus, 2011, 66.

¹² J Foxxe, *Book of Martyrs*. Honorius (Emperor 395-423) outlawed gladiatorial conquests in the east (390s) and west (404).

ethics: 'what do you feel about it?' Serious ethical issues such as embryo wastage, embryo experimentation, use of donor gametes in assisted reproduction, abortion, assisted suicide or euthanasia are seen as simply matters of personal choice. It is estimated that over the past forty years in the world there have been around 1.42 billion abortions.¹³ That's the equivalent of the entire population of India.

As Christians we are called to bear witness in our day to the foundational biblical truth of the sanctity of all human life made in God's image.

Women afforded equal dignity

The Early Church

What about Christianity's record with regard to women? Radical feminists accuse Christianity of oppressive patriarchy, and blame it for oppressing women through the centuries. Nothing could be further from the truth.

At the time the New Testament was written, fathers routinely gave away their daughters as child-brides. Men could force their wives to have abortions. Or they forced their wives to abandon sick, disabled or female new-born babies, to leave them to die. There was no expectation that husbands should be faithful to their wives. It was commonplace for free men to use slaves for sexual gratification, whether male or female. In addition, they would expect to have mistresses.

In this context, Paul's insistence on a single standard of morality for men and women (1 Corinthians 7:1-6), and his call for husbands to love and care for their wives (Ephesians 5:25-33) was revolutionary. The strict demands for chastity outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage were just as outrageous and countercultural in the first century AD as they are today. These demands were liberating and life-giving compared with the exploitation and abuse suffered by so many at that time.

The early Christians lived in a culture where a small, privileged elite of males had sexual access to the rest of the population. This ubiquitous culture of abuse created a vast ocean of exploitation and suffering. When God's norms for sexual morality and family life break down, it is often women and children who suffer most. Roman sexual culture rested on a bedrock of coercion; the poorest men who didn't have free access to their own slaves could hire prostitutes for almost nothing. Vile abuse surrounded the 'sex trade', where the sexual services of youths and women were sold for pathetically low sums:

The commodification of sex was carried out with all the ruthless efficiency of an industrial operation, the unfree body bearing the pressures of insatiable market demand. In the brothel the prostitute's body became, little by little, 'like a corpse'.¹⁴

The Christian sexual ethic forbade the buying and selling of sex. It held men and women to an equal standard. It gave equal dignity to husband and wife. This was revolutionary.

By contrast to Christian behaviour, the second-century orator Juvenal portrayed a society in which large numbers of people were dangerously addicted to ever more extreme sexual behaviour. Nothing was shameful or out of bounds.¹⁵ Stage plays celebrated incest, physical torture for gratification, paedophilia and bestiality. The early Christians were counter-cultural in opposing such decadence. Why did they do so? Because of the insistence that God the Giver of life calls for the protection of life. Because of the conviction that the faithful God calls for a respect for the promises of marriage to be honoured.

The Christian insistence on marital fidelity increasingly served to protect women, as did the prohibition of

¹³ Human Life International.

¹⁴ K Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity*, Harvard Univ. Press, 2013, 49.

¹⁵ *How Christianity Changed the World*, 82.

arbitrary divorce. Christians opposed the practice of marrying off young girls. When Constantine became Emperor, he initiated legal protections for women and marriage.¹⁶

Women began to secure property rights, and received the right of guardianship over their children (who before had been seen as the possession of their men).¹⁷ Because of Christian influence, in 374 the Emperor Valentinian repealed the 1000-year-old *patria potestas*: Husbands lost the right of life and death over their family, including their wives.¹⁸ This meant that the accompanying cultural practices which placed married woman under the husband's absolute rule and gave a father the right to sell his daughter to her husband, also declined.

Sexual immorality was condemned, but radically, the one exploiting the prostitute was counted as guilty. Where a slave was coerced against their will, Basil of Caesarea assured them that they would be shown mercy by God, as humans lacking volition could not be held responsible for the acts to which they were subjected.¹⁹ Basil's passionate concern for the victims of prostitution eventually resulted in imperial legislation to eliminate the practice. In 428 AD the Eastern Emperor (Theodosius II) proclaimed that those who had been trapped in prostitution should be helped out, given alternative means of living, and *not* penalised for what they were coerced into doing. But meanwhile – those who had coerced them whether slave owners, fathers or pimps, should be punished:

*Pimps... will be proscribed by exile to the public mines, which is less of a punishment than that of a woman who is seized by a pimp and compelled to endure the filth of an intercourse that she did not will.*²⁰

This was radical. It was the first time that everyone, whatever their social status or lack of it, could claim protection from sexual predators. Then, during the next century, the Emperor Justinian (Eastern Roman Emperor 527-565) commissioned a special task force to investigate the use of coercion in the sex industry in Constantinople. He actively sought to repress sexual exploitation in his empire. He and his wife Theodosia financed a refuge for reformed prostitutes.²¹

The spread of Christianity

When significant numbers of people in any community live according to Christian ethics, it has a positive impact on the lives of women. Over the centuries, as Christian missionaries travelled to proclaim the gospel, many challenged the oppression and lack of opportunity suffered by women and girls. One of the first indicators of Christian influence was the provision of education for girls as well as boys.

The first female missionary to the Far East from America was Ann Judson, who left all she knew in America to sail for Burma in 1813. With her husband she pioneered Christian mission in Burma, but she especially focussed on educating girls. Ann believed that Christian education for women was the means by which Asian females could be liberated from what was all too often a degraded and miserable life. In 1822 she published a powerful and widely-read address to the women of America, in which she challenged them to give sacrificially to support female education in the East. Her appeal had huge impact in terms of funds and volunteers. When Ann died prematurely in Burma, her death inspired many other women to volunteer in the cause.²²

Another Christian who devoted her life to female education was Fidelia Fiske. In 1843 she travelled from America to Persia (now Iran) to pioneer female education. She saw the provision of good schools for girls as the only way out of the terribly oppressed life women were trapped in. She wrote:

¹⁶ *Feminine Threads*, 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁸ *How Christianity Changed the World*, 111.

¹⁹ K Harper, in *Christianity and Freedom*, Volume 1, 137-8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

²² Sharon James, *Ann Judson*, Evangelical Press, 2015.

*The women were regarded by the men as drudges and slaves, and were compelled to spend most of the time in outdoor labour, among the vineyards and wheat-fields, often going out to work carrying not only their heavy implements, but also their babies. When, at evening, they returned from the fields, however weary, they had to milk the cows, prepare their husband's meal, and wait till he had finished before having any food themselves. It was commonplace for husbands to beat their wives brutally...*²³

After sixteen years she had established a successful school for girls, and the lives of many women had been transformed. Fidelity's health was broken and she returned to America, where she continued to promote female education.

William Carey is often regarded as the 'father of modern missions'. Although the British government specifically forbade the entry of missionaries to India, he and his fellow missionaries ministered in the early 19th century in the Danish territory of Serampore in Southern India. Among many other social reforms, they set up the first schools for girls. By means of female education they hoped to break the practice of marrying off little girls from infancy onwards. Also, if women were educated and able to earn a living, that would break the practice of widow burning, which was practised partly because widows were regarded as an economic liability (they were forbidden to earn a living, *and* forbidden to remarry). William Carey campaigned ceaselessly against the practice of widow burning. Many of the widows who died in this way were themselves no more than children. Carey conducted rigorous research, and publicised what was going on. One of his great allies in England was William Wilberforce. It took twenty-five years before the campaign against widow burning was successful. Often during that period Wilberforce would insist on reading out the names of widows who had been killed in this way during family breakfast before family prayers. The practice was finally made a criminal offence in 1829.

Christians also led the way in opposing foot binding in China, which was only banned in 1912.²⁴ Christian missionaries in various countries tried to protect girls from genital cutting. Sadly, that is still widely practised.²⁵

As Christianity spread rapidly in Latin America, Asia and Africa during the twentieth century, this had a positive impact on women. Research in those areas where Christianity is growing fastest, shows that, as with the early church, the worth afforded to women is a significant factor. For example, when poor women are converted and join the new evangelical churches, they join communities with a high view of the family, and an emphasis on male responsibility and fidelity. Their husbands are far less likely to squander family resources on drinking, gambling or prostitutes.²⁶

Christianity today

Women today worldwide do still suffer oppression. But which are the countries where women are held back, forbidden an education, married off as children, and subjected to systematic abuses such as honour killings and genital cutting? These are the countries where Christianity is disallowed. Although most are Muslim-majority nations, the country in the world named as most dangerous for women is India, a Hindu-majority nation, with maybe one billion Hindus.²⁷ But there is a strong Christian minority there, estimated around 71 million. And Christians are often taking the lead in changing things for the better for women.

Baglur slum in the great city of Bangalore contains more than 150 churches, 120 of them Pentecostal/charismatic, all within 1.5 square kilometres. When in-depth interviews were conducted with women of all religions living in Baglur, it was obvious that becoming a Christian leads to liberation from fatalism and hopelessness. The women of other faiths acknowledged that the *Christian* husbands are noticeably less

²³ DT Fiske, *The Cross and the Crown; or, Faith Working by Love: The Life of Fidelity Fiske, missionary to Persia 1843-1858*, reprinted by Tentmaker Publications, 2005, 91-2.

²⁴ *How Christianity Changed the World*, 118-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 119-21.

²⁶ P Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 96-97.

²⁷ 'India's Shame', *The Times*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/india-s-shame-5b7lzdg60> (accessed 14 September, 2018).

abusive, more loving and more likely to take earnings home than squander them on drink or other women. The *Christian* women are transformed in terms of attitude towards themselves, they have a new concept of value and dignity, they are confident to speak out against and resist abuse. They are motivated to work more, earn more, give more, save more, and many are enabled to significantly improve the lives of their families.²⁸

In 2010 the feminist publishing house Virago published a book called *Half The Sky: How To Change The World*. It documents female oppression worldwide and calls for action. The authors are liberal feminists, but they admit that Bible-believing Christians are at the forefront of the fight against female oppression in the hardest places on earth. They accept that in terms of being willing to devote a whole lifetime to ministry in those hard places, it is Bible-believing Christians who are motivated to do that. Others may volunteer short term. But to sacrifice a whole life? That needs an eternal perspective.²⁹ The spread of evangelical Christianity has had a hugely positive impact on the lives of women.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depicts a dystopian nightmare of sexual slavery as the product of religious fundamentalism. It portrays the enemy as 'patriarchy', and seems to confirm the radical feminist notion that Christianity is bad news for women.

The *reality* is that the sexual slavery endemic in the ancient world was *dispelled* by the advance of Christianity. Sexual slavery is advancing again today. Exact figures are impossible, and disputed, but the International Labour Organisation estimates that there are around 21 million victims of human trafficking worldwide, and that human trafficking is a \$150 billion industry.³⁰ That is not because of Christianity. It is fuelled by the global pornography industry, which Christians oppose.

And, worldwide, it is often Christians who are at the forefront of opposing trafficking and slavery. For example, in India, Christians in The Dignity Freedom Network are working to liberate and raise the dignity of those trapped in injustice and slavery, and the sex trade, many of whom are part of the so called 'Dalit' caste.³¹

Is Christianity really bad news for women? The evidence proves the opposite.³²

Sharon James

²⁸ RS Shah, in *Christianity and Freedom*, Volume 2, 113-131.

²⁹ ND Kristof and S WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, Virago, 2010, 157-160.

³⁰ Quoted in D Darling, *The Dignity Revolution*, The Good Book Company, 2018, 112.

³¹ <https://www.om.org/en/news/freeing-dalits> (accessed 11 December, 2019).

³² Sharon James, *God's Design for Women in an Age of Gender Confusion*, Evangelical Press, 2019.

Coronavirus

Coronavirus – where to start? And when to stop? Our news screens are full of it, our lives are subject to it, and the misinformation is troubling. So, if vaccines are the answer, what are the questions? How are they made? How are they tested? Are they medically safe? Are they ethically sound? Are some bioethically dubious? What should we think and do? This year a few of us will be infected by Covid-19, next year all of us will be faced with a Covid-19 vaccine. We need knowledge and understanding. Here goes:

Vaccines – the basics

Vaccinations save millions of lives each year. Vaccines prepare a person's immune system to recognise and fight particular viral and bacterial infections. If a vaccinated person is subsequently exposed to disease-causing organisms, the body is primed to attack and destroy them, thus preventing the illness. Such a strategy already prevents 2 to 3 million global deaths each year from diseases like diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, influenza and measles.

Lockdowns are temporary, vaccines are permanent (probably, maybe). Vaccination is widely considered to be one of the long-term answers to controlling SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the disease Covid-19. There is currently a concerted world-wide push to make it a vaccine-preventable disease. So, how is vaccine progress made? Typically, scientists take several years to prepare a vaccine before testing it on people. Such early safety trials, known as phase 1 and phase 2, take several years to complete. If all goes well – and it normally does not – then phase 3, the final stage, can begin, comparing thousands of people who receive the vaccine with thousands who are given a placebo. It may take another three years to get these results. Only then – a decade or more after the research was begun – will a vaccine manufacturer build a factory to make the successful product. Then there is the issue of distribution. Getting a vaccination programme to 80% of global coverage generally takes about another 30 years.

Covid-19 vaccine strategies

That protracted procedure is clearly not the plan for Covid-19 vaccines – the world is in a hurry. So the World Health Organization (WHO) has already arranged a strategy, known as the Solidarity Vaccines Trial. Several vaccines will be given at random to one large group of volunteers, while a smaller group will receive the placebo. It has taken nine months to get off the ground, but this trial is due to start in late October with a small study in Latin America.

The US Government has taken a different tack. It has opted for a 'harmonised approach'. This will allow vaccine makers to run their own trials, but only if they follow certain guidelines and let the National Institutes of Health (NIH) test all of their volunteers in the same way. In exchange for following these rules, the pharmaceutical companies will benefit from using the network of NIH clinical testing sites and they will receive some of the US Government's promised \$10 billion vaccine fund.

As of late October, AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson and Moderna have begun trials in this network. Novavax and Sanofi are expected to start their phase 3 studies in the next couple of months. But Pfizer, one of the front-runners, has not joined the network, opting instead to run its own hush-hush trials.

The UK has taken a third way, with up to six possible vaccines currently being developed and tested. Of course, there is the well-known Covid-19 vaccine joint trial being conducted by AstraZeneca and the Oxford Vaccine Group, which began on 20 January. It centres on an already well-studied, and regarded as safe, chimpanzee adenovirus vaccine vector (ChAdOx1), developed at Oxford's Jenner Institute. This was chosen as the most suitable vaccine technology for a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine as it can generate a strong immune response from just one jab – other potential vaccines may require a booster dose.

A feature of coronaviruses is those familiar club-shaped spikes on their surface coats. This Oxford vaccine contains the genetic sequence of this surface spike protein inside the ChAdOx1 construct. Once vaccinated,

the surface spike protein is produced and this readies the patient's immune system to attack if the virus ever infects the body. If proved effective and granted approval, production of the AstraZeneca Oxford vaccine will be scaled up for distribution across the UK population and also to several other hard-hit countries.

Other UK trials exist. For example, there is the Imperial challenge trial being run by hVivo, a spin-off company from Queen Mary University of London. Already some 2,000 people have signed up to be jabbed and a month later be exposed to the virus. This vaccine works not by delivering a weakened form of Covid-19, but by delivering synthetic strands of the virus's genetic code. These instruct the patient's cells to produce the SARS-CoV-2 spike surface protein and the required immune response and hence immunity to the virus.

And the University of Cambridge hopes to start clinical trials soon with its DIOS-CoVax2. This DNA-based strategy uses computer-generated antigen structures that are encoded by vaccinating with synthetic genes. These in turn re-programme the body's immune system to produce antibodies against the virus. And other UK trials exist, such as that from Synairgen with its experimental drug, SNG001 – an inhaled formulation of interferon-beta-1a, which has known antiviral properties.

In addition, the UK Government has been busy securing doses of vaccines – recently 60 million doses of the inactivated Covid-19 vaccine, VLA2001, were recently purchased from the French company Valneva SE. They will cost £450m for delivery in the second half of 2021 with the option for another 130 million doses for between 2022 and 2025. And other deals have already been signed for 340 million doses of various putative vaccines – we should have enough!

And besides this hunt for effective vaccines there is an on-going UK national clinical trial seeking to identify beneficial treatments for those already suffering from Covid-19. Known as the RECOVERY Trial, it is assessing the beneficial effects of the cheap and low-dose steroid, dexamethasone, plus other drugs, such as azithromycin, tocilizumab, convalescent plasma and REGN-COV2.

There are now more than 200 Covid-19 vaccine candidates under development globally, with about 40 of these in the early human trial phases with 10 in phase 3. And how will the winner(s) be selected? The approval and authorisation of a vaccine will depend on how much protection it provides in a phase 3 trial, in other words, on its efficacy. In June, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) set 50% efficacy as the target. But the efficacy of a vaccine in a clinical trial will not necessarily be the same as in a real-world setting. Phase 3 trials have margins of error and the actual efficacy may be higher, or lower.

Furthermore, this current vaccine race has important downsides. For instance, once a particular vaccine has proved sufficiently efficacious and has been selected for mass use, will other vaccine manufacturers drop out of trials, even if, in the long run, their product would have proved to be superior? And because this first wave of vaccines is likely to be reserved for healthcare workers and other high-risk groups, does this imply that such valuable test 'guinea pigs', working in infected environments, will not be available and eligible to enter other new clinical trials?

Yet all of this means that by spring or summer 2021, there will probably be several coronavirus vaccines for consumers to choose from. But the selection will be complex. It is hoped, for example, that across all trials, some molecular signature in a vaccinated person's blood will show they are protected. However, there is no guarantee that such a signature will emerge. And if it does, how long will it persist indicating that the person is still protected? Our current knowledge about the short-term attributes of such vaccines is poor while their long-term traits remain largely unknown. For example, the preservation of vaccine efficacy and the appearance of dangerous side effects are two big unknowns for the foreseeable future.

Vaccine general ethics

From all the candidate vaccines in production and in clinical trials, presumably some will become globally available. Which to opt for? Will only one be offered locally or nationally, or will there be a choice? Will

vaccination be mandatory? That is unlikely based on a US survey conducted earlier this year which reported that less than 50% of respondents would commit to getting a coronavirus vaccine whenever it becomes available. That famous entrepreneur, Elon Musk, has already unhelpfully stated that he and his family would not take a coronavirus vaccine even if it became immediately available. 'I am not at risk, neither are my kids', he has rather foolishly said.

Of course, such behaviours may change in the real world. But people with vaccine hesitancy and vaccine refusal exist. The refusers are unlikely to be just conspiracy theorists, misinformed sceptics and anti-vaxxers. An October 2020 report in *The Lancet* noted that 31 million people follow anti-vaccine groups on Facebook and around one in six British people were unlikely to agree to being vaccinated. Maybe that is not so surprising when even hard-nosed scientists fail to agree on most aspects of Covid-19.

There is a palpable public mistrust over so many facets of Covid-19. None of this has been helped by Russia and China apparently, and clandestinely, surging ahead. Safety and transparency have been too often lacking – they are essential. Pharmaceutical companies and their academic partners need to disclose and explain their protocols and results. Concerns about vaccines being too hastily approved, suspicion of the giant biotech corporations' motives and the increase of vaccine misinformation are combining to erode the public's trust in how vaccines are approved and used.

A prime example of this need for safety and transparency occurred in the UK with the much-favoured Oxford vaccine, produced by AstraZeneca in collaboration with Oxford University. All was apparently going well until 6 September, when phase 3 trials of the Oxford vaccine were suspended by AstraZeneca in the UK, USA and Brazil after a serious adverse reaction occurred in one of the nearly 30,000 test volunteers. The female patient was rushed to hospital after she displayed symptoms of transverse myelitis (TM) – a rare condition affecting the spinal cord. AstraZeneca stated that there would be a 'voluntary pause of vaccination across all trials' as part of 'a standard review process'. It was reported that by 12 September the trials had resumed, with the exception of those in the USA. However, there was a dearth of information from AstraZeneca. Perhaps this largely unexplained incident will serve as a wake-up call about the need for communication of vaccine testing and its safety and transparency.

No other seriously adverse effects have been reported. However, high fever, body aches, headaches and exhaustion are some of the symptoms participants in Moderna's and Pfizer's vaccine trials have suffered post-vaccination. While the symptoms have been uncomfortable, and at times intense, they have typically subsided after a day or less.

Vaccine pro-life ethics

But there is another, and much more troublesome, issue surrounding Covid-19 vaccines. Are some vaccines manufactured from aborted human material? If so, are they ethically acceptable to be used by pro-life people?

Here is the most current newsworthy example. It relates to the so-called AstraZeneca Oxford vaccine again. Scientists at the University of Oxford have engineered a chimpanzee cold virus that contains important fragments of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes Covid-19. This chimpanzee cold virus is being grown in human fetal cells. When injected into macaques, this engineered virus acts as a vaccine, triggering an immune response that protects these primates so that they do not develop serious disease. But here is the rub. These 'human fetal cells' come from a cell line known as HEK-293. This was derived from the kidneys of a girl aborted in the Netherlands in 1972. HEK-293 cells are commonly described as 'immortalised epithelial cells', never as stem cells. The line was cultured by Alex Van der Eb in the early 1970s at his laboratory at the University of Leiden, Holland. The source of the cells was an aborted female fetus of unknown parentage. The name HEK-293 was derived from Human Embryonic Kidney and it was one of Eb's collaborator's 293rd experiment.

Does this present a bioethical problem? The aborted girl would by now probably be a 40-year-old mother with her own family. Is the origin of HEK-293 sufficiently time-distant to make little or no difference?

Should we benefit from the body parts of a non-consenting human being? Does our lack of direct involvement absolve us? About these things, we will disagree.

Many human fetal cell lines, and HEK-293 in particular, have been obtained mostly from elective abortions that are now not contemporary. They have been used often and widely in medical therapies ranging from the production of anti-psychotic drugs to cancer immunotherapies, from vaccines against rabies and rubella to studies for treatments of Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injuries and degenerative diseases, such as motor neurone disease (MND).

Covid-19 and President Trump

It was perhaps somewhat fitting that the acerbic leader of the most powerful nation in the world should catch Covid-19 and subsequently inflame a global row about its treatment. On 2 October, President Trump developed worrisome symptoms and tested positive for Covid-19. He was flown to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Maryland, where, within 24 hours, he had received an experimental, cutting-edge antibody treatment not available to other Americans. The White House stated that among his other ongoing therapies Trump had received 'a single 8-gram dose' of 'an emergency cocktail of anti-coronavirus antibodies', known only as REGN-COV2. It belongs to a promising new class of antiviral drugs, and is produced by Regeneron Pharmaceuticals of New York State.

The US king of misinformation, fake news and sloppy behaviour regarding Covid-19 had been infected and struck down, right in the midst of a presidential election campaign. Yet Mr Trump said he believed that REGN-COV2 had helped him vanquish his coronavirus infection in record time. But there was more. Here was the most pro-life US President ever, and an outspoken opponent of fetal tissue research, being accused, albeit mostly inaccurately, of taking drugs made with cells from an aborted fetus. He was lambasted by his critics. The UK newspaper *Metro* declared, 'Trump faces hypocrisy allegations after it was revealed Regeneron [sic] is made from stem cells originally taken from an embryonic kidney.' And the *MIT Technology Review*, more accurately claimed, 'Trump's antibody treatment was tested using cells originally derived from an abortion.' Social media users were harsher. Here is one Twitter message, 'So it turns out that monoclonal antibodies that Trump is on are from fetal stem cells. So Trump is being treated/saved with dead babies. Republicans? Amy Barrett? Pro-lifers? Anybody?'

Was this true or was it fake news? According to Regeneron, REGN-COV2 is manufactured in cells from Chinese hamster ovaries, so-called 'CHO' cells – not in human cells. Nevertheless, the involvement of HEK-293 again arises. But this cell line, originally derived from a human fetus, was being used in another way. According to Regeneron, laboratory tests used to assess the potency of its antibodies employed a standardised supply of cells called HEK-293T, a stable clone of HEK-293, which, over the years, has been transformed from the original cell line, meaning it should no longer be considered as 'fetal tissue'.

So, while Regeneron did not directly use human fetal cells to make the monoclonal antibody treatment given to Trump, it did use cells derived remotely from that 1972 Dutch abortion to make the targets for its antibodies – the mimics of the spike protein of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Monoclonal antibodies home in on specific targets. To fight coronavirus, they are engineered precisely to attack the spike protein used by the virus to grapple onto cells. To make sure their antibodies were working correctly, Regeneron needed to employ laboratory facsimiles of this spike protein, and for that, they used the HEK-293T cells.

Can this story be corroborated? An official statement from the conservative, pro-life US-based Charlotte Lozier Institute by David Prentice and Tara Sander Lee gives a lengthy scientific explanation about the Regeneron therapy. Prentice and Lee conclude, 'The president was not given any medicines to treat COVID-19 that involved the destruction of human life. No human embryonic stem cells or human fetal tissue were used to produce the treatments President Trump received – period. And finally, the anti-viral medicine remdesivir and the anti-inflammatory corticosteroid dexamethasone, also given to the president to treat COVID-19, are chemicals – no cells of any kind were used to produce these medicines.'

Moreover, a spokesperson for Regeneron explained, 'We did not use human stem cells or human embryonic

stem cells in the development of REGN-COV2. We did use the HEK-293T cell line to test our antibodies' ability to neutralize the SARS-CoV-2 virus.' In other words, the HEK-293T tool, developed years ago, allowed Regeneron to determine which antibodies that had been developed might be most effective against the virus. These cells were not used to create the antibody cocktail itself, but they were used to test its potency.

Further confirmatory evidence can be found on the Regeneron Pharmaceutical website under its 'Regeneron Position Statement on Stem Cell Research'. Part of it reads, 'The stem cells most commonly used at Regeneron are mouse embryonic stem cells and human blood stem cells. Currently, there are limited research efforts employing human-induced pluripotent stem cell lines derived from adult human cells and human embryonic stem cells that are approved for research use by the National Institutes of Health and created solely through in vitro fertilization.' That is both honest and, in terms of the use of 'human embryonic stem cells', disappointing. But it is not a sufficiently bioethical indictment of Regeneron or its REGN-COV2.

How to think and respond

Let us indulge in a little bioethical casuistry. Can someone who considers abortion to be an evil, a grave injustice, use such medical therapies that were developed in a way that involved that injustice? Yes, but with conditions. Such therapies may be considered morally justifiable, but only if their use does not contribute to any future evil acts, and if their current use is occasioned by a grave proportionate reason. In other words, the use of these vaccines must demand no contemporary evil abortions, and their current use must spring from a virtuous reason that is both seriously and urgently required.

However, some people may still be concerned about the morality of using vaccines, or other medicines, developed from cells historically linked to aborted fetuses. Can a citizen of conscience, who is opposed to everyday abortion, use a vaccine to protect herself and her loved ones during this time of pandemic? Yes, but they can also refuse, even if the vaccination is ethically justifiable. However, society also has a right, and indeed, a moral obligation, to protect its citizens from illness and death. Check out Matthew 7:12. Therefore, justice demands that we balance our concerns with the competing interests in our communities. Indeed, those who refuse to be vaccinated because of their moral concerns should also expect to be prohibited from entering public spaces, such as schools, restaurants, shops and airports, where they may unwittingly catch or spread the disease. Nonetheless, no-one should rub raw another's conscience – so disagreements among Christians and others may persist. It is a classic Romans 14 situation.

In summary, we live in a complex, but not morally-neutral, world where we stand to benefit from the present and past actions of both virtuous and vicious men and women. How can we apply bioethical, even biblical, principles to negotiate these complexities without losing our moral integrity? In the current pandemic, citizens of good conscience may use Covid-19 vaccines derived with the aid, but not as current, active ingredients, of historically-obtained human fetal cell lines. In addition, such men and women should avoid public scandal by first making their opposition to abortion absolutely clear. The upshot of understanding these issues has been an increased global call for unimpeachably bioethical 'clean' vaccines. That would be good. People should not be forced to make the choice between being vaccinated against Covid-19 and acting against their consciences.

What are we to do? It would be nice to live ethically pure lives. But we live in the real world that is perforated with evil and sin. We cannot go out and live in this world without interacting and being tainted by things and people we consider immoral or unethical. Our thinking and our actions are often wrong and naïve. When Boots the chemist started selling the morning-after pill, we boycotted its stores. It did little except temporarily salve our consciences. We now creep back to shop there occasionally. Like many disasters, this Covid-19 pandemic is highlighting weaknesses in ourselves, in our worldviews, skill sets and systems. What are we to do? Live dangerously, but in the hands of God.

John Ling

Christianity and Transhumanism

Humanity stands at a decisive moment in its history. This is because human beings are now creating technologies that will improve their capacities so dramatically that they may no longer really be human in the usual sense of that word, but transhuman or posthuman.³³ But is this what God had planned for humanity?

To answer this question, it may first be necessary to try to understand what the concepts of transhumanism and posthumanism actually mean.

Transhumanism

The prefix 'trans' (from the Latin for 'across') is generally used to describe that someone or something has moved across from, or beyond, a certain boundary. Accordingly, transhumanism is an ideology reflecting a willingness to move beyond the frontier of what is considered to be human. The term, itself, was developed by the British biologist Julian Huxley (1887-1975) who used it for the title of an influential 1957 article³⁴ to suggest that:

*Up till now human life has generally been, as [the English Philosopher] Hobbes [1588-1679] described it, 'nasty, brutish and short'; the great majority of human beings... have been afflicted with misery... [W]e can justifiably hold the belief that... the present limitations and miserable frustrations of our existence could be in large measure surmounted... The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself – not just sporadically... but in its entirety, as humanity.*³⁵

In other words, transhumanism is a rejection of the assumption that human nature is a constant and that *nature* in general, or *human nature* in particular, should be protected and retained as an imperative. Thus, transhumanists (those who support transhumanism ideology)³⁶ accept an evolutionary account of human beings but are not content to remain passive and simply let biological and social influences direct the future of the human race. Instead, they would intentionally seek to control human evolution and direct it towards what they consider to be improved and enhanced descendants.³⁷ In so doing, they would use tools such as genetic manipulation, nanotechnology, cybernetics, robotics, informatics and computer simulation.³⁸

Transhumanism also reflects an unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the current abilities of humanity.³⁹ It focuses on how human beings ought to be transformed so that they might flourish, live longer, healthier lives, avoid suffering, enjoy greater cognitive powers and an increased capacity to experience more robust and pleasurable inner states.^{40,41} However, transhumanism does not generally give a vision of the final ideal of future enhanced persons. Thus, progress is not measured by attaining some pre-set goal but by using technology to expand human choices. As such, transhumanism offers an ethical vision in which

³³ Ronald Cole-Turner, Afterword – Concluding Reflections: Yearning for Enhancement, in Calvin Mercer & Derek F. Maher (eds) *Transhumanism and the Body*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan (2014), 174-191 (175).

³⁴ However, the word actually derives from an earlier 1940 paper by the Canadian philosopher William Lighthall (1857-1954); Harrison, Peter and Wolyniak, Joseph, 'The History of "Transhumanism"'. *Notes and Queries* 62 (2015), 465-7.

³⁵ Huxley, Julian, 'Transhumanism', in *New Bottles for New Wine: Essays*, London: Chatto & Windus, (1957), 13-17.

³⁶ Bostrom indicates: 'A transhumanist is simply someone who advocates transhumanism'; Nick Bostrom, Introduction – The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction, in Calvin Mercer & Derek F. Maher (eds) *Transhumanism and the Body*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan (2014), 1-17 (4).

³⁷ Steve Fuller and Calvin Mercer, Introduction, in Calvin Mercer & Derek F. Maher (eds) *Transhumanism and the Body*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan (2014), iii -vi (v).

³⁸ Michael Burdett, *Technology and the Rise of Transhumanism*, Grove Books, Cambridge (2014), 5.

³⁹ Michael Burdett and Victoria Lorrimar, Creatures Bound for Glory: Biotechnological Enhancement and Visions of Human Flourishing, *Studies in Christian Ethics* (2019) Vol. 32(2), 241-253 (243).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴¹ Nick Bostrom, Introduction – The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction, in Calvin Mercer & Derek F. Maher (eds) *Transhumanism and the Body*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan (2014), 1-17 (3).

technological innovation is the central human achievement and thereby becomes the medium to attain authenticity, liberty and justice.⁴²

Transhumanists would also welcome the bringing into existence of transhuman persons who are individuals who have moved across, or beyond, the distinct boundary of what is considered to be human, though some human characteristics may remain. In this context, transhuman persons can, for example, be considered as having bodies which may be recognisably human and include:

- (1) Entirely biological transhuman persons such as:
 - Biological synthetic humanoid persons (often defined as androids)
 - Human-nonhuman interspecies persons
 - Any other entirely biological artificial persons with body parts which resemble those of human beings including the brain
- (2) Part-machine, part-biological transhuman persons (cyborgs) such as:
 - Persons with machine bodies and human or non-human biological brains
 - Persons with biological bodies and computer brains
 - Persons who are a combination of the above
- (3) Machine transhuman persons such as:
 - Robots who look and act in a similar way to human persons

Posthumanism

The prefix 'post' (from the Latin for 'after' or 'behind') is generally used to describe the reality that someone or something is coming 'after', 'later', or 'subsequent to' in time. Accordingly, posthumanism is an ideology reflecting a willingness to eventually reach a stage in time where nothing which may be defined as human remains. In this regard, the American author N. Katherine Hayles characterises four different aspects of a posthuman future:⁴³

- The prioritisation of information patterns over material substances
- The acceptance that consciousness is just a mere product of the physical
- The recognition that the human body is just an original form and substance of a being which can be upgraded or replaced
- An acknowledgement that human beings can be considered as intelligent machines, making the two interchangeable

Thus, a posthuman person is an individual who no longer expresses human characteristics in any significant manner. As the Swedish philosopher, Nick Bostrom, explains:

It is sometimes useful to talk about possible future beings whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of the present humans as to be no longer unambiguously human by our current standards. The standard word for such beings is 'posthuman'.⁴⁴

Generally, however, it is difficult to accurately describe the posthuman individual. In this regard, Hayles characterises such a being as *'an amalgam, a collection of heretogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.'*⁴⁵ Thus posthuman beings would exist in a state that has moved completely beyond the boundary of what is considered human and would, for example, include:

⁴² Hava Tirosh-Samuels, *Transhumanism as a secularist faith*, *Zygon* (2012) Vol. 47, No. 4, 728.

⁴³ Hayles, N. Katherine, *How we became Posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press (1999), 2-3.

⁴⁴ Bostrom, *Transhumanism and the Body*, 3.

⁴⁵ Hayles, *How we became Posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*, 3.

(1) Biological posthuman persons, such as:

- Synthetic biological persons who no longer retain any human characteristics whatsoever

(2) Non-biological posthuman persons, such as:

- Virtual persons living in cyber-space (who are, for example, the result of a mind upload)

(3) Cyborg Posthumans

- Persons with a combination of the biological and machine but who no longer retain any human characteristics whatsoever

A Christian Perspective

Over recent years, a number of commentators have both welcomed and criticised transhuman and posthuman ideologies.⁴⁶ But because of the radical nature of such beliefs, a number of concerns may be presented from a Christian perspective which can now be examined.

i) *Playing God*

To begin with, concerns exist that the bringing into existence of such new kinds of persons may violate the divine prerogative of creating life. Under this argument, tinkering with the generation of persons is tantamount to 'playing God'. However, it is often unclear what this expression actually means. For example, it may be countered that God always meant humanity to play God. Thus, in the same way as God created his human children in the garden of Eden, human beings were always meant to procreate their own children (and so, in a way, play at being God). The American theologian Jacob Shatzer indicates: *'Maybe our lives, as those made in the image of God, should be lives of "playing" at being like God.'*⁴⁷ He adds:

*If Christianity means following Christ, imitating Christ, 'playing at' being Christ, 'playing God' can be reoriented. This 'playing' is not a 'power play' as our world has come to think of power – it is not exercising our knowledge and strength in remaking ourselves. Rather, it is humble play, accepting limitations and flourishing within them, following Christ in his suffering. This humble 'playing God' can impact the way practitioners and patients approach medical care, as well as the overall stance on posthumanism.*⁴⁸

In other words, it may only be when human beings cheat in the game of 'playing God' that ethical concerns arise as in the bringing into existence of transhuman and posthuman persons. As the UK-based theologian, Michael Burdett, explains, *'playing God appeals to divinely ordained orders of creation'* which should be respected, adding:

*Proponents of this position will often hold to some form of natural law. God's intentions and directions for human beings, other creatures, and the rest of creation are at least in part visible in the way God has created the world. Having been ordained by God, these natural laws are not meant to be broken and doing so is an affront to the moral order.*⁴⁹

In this regard, bringing into existence transhuman and posthuman persons may be considered as a form of cheating at the game of playing God in that such a development would be considered unnatural by those who believe in natural laws given by the order of God's creation.

ii) *Human beings were always meant to be human*

In any discussion of transhumanism and posthumanism it is also difficult to determine what is actually

⁴⁶ Mercer & Maher (eds) *Transhumanism and the Body*.

⁴⁷ Jacob Shatzer, *A Limited Image? Practitioners, Patients, and Playing God*, *Ethics & Medicine* (2018) Vol. 34(1), 21-29 (21).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹ Burdett, *Technology and the Rise of Transhumanism*, 12.

meant by *human* and what *true humanity* entails. In Christianity, this can only be achieved by looking to Jesus Christ, who is both the perfect image of God and the perfect definition of true humanity.⁵⁰ In this respect, the protestant Scottish-American theologian Nigel Cameron notes the central importance of human nature: *'The classical Christian belief is that having been raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, he [Christ] "sat down" at the right hand of God the Father... Human nature has been chosen by God to be ours, and also to be his own.'*⁵¹ Similarly, the Scottish theologian Alan Torrance indicates that one of the most important elements of the Christian tradition is:

*[T]he perception that in Jesus Christ we are presented not only with God but with what it is to be human in truth – that is, with the one who uniquely defines human nature as it is created and elected to be. It is in him – rather than in the originally created humanity, represented by the first Adam – that the telos of humanity is determined. He is the final or eschatos Adam, the true imago Dei, or imago Patris and, as such, defines and, indeed, constitutes humanity in its properly functional form as this involves our existing in 'communion' with God.*⁵²

It follows that in order to understand what is really meant by *human* it is necessary to look to Jesus Christ, who redeems new humanity.⁵³ As Torrance also stresses: *'Clearly, from a Christian perspective there is indeed a true human nature that must be conceived as invariant and is conceived in terms of participation within the "new humanity".'*⁵⁴ Cameron adds:

*From this perspective, it is plain that all efforts at the enhancement of human nature – with enhancement defined in terms of a break with the human analogy – are theologically excluded since they have the effect of reshaping that human nature that is both God given and God taken. The exemplar of Homo sapiens is the glorified Jesus Christ.*⁵⁵

This also means that questions relating to the 'human' nature of new persons, such as transhuman or posthuman persons, can only be seen through Jesus Christ and the new human nature which he has redeemed. Though they may have been denied humanity through sin when first brought into existence in this fallen world, these new kinds of transhuman and posthuman persons will eventually be brought, through death, into the presence of the embodied Christ. They will then put on the true humanity of Christ and be redeemed with the entirely human nature for which they were destined.⁵⁶

iii) *Human beings were always meant to be vulnerable, weak and limited*

In transhumanism and posthumanism, one of the declared aims is to go beyond the human in order to address humanity's limitedness, weakness and suffering. However, this may then undermine the crucial human concepts of compassion (Latin for 'suffering with') or empathy (Greek for 'feeling in'), concepts that are present even in the perfect triune God. Indeed, being able to suffer with others is maybe what makes us, as human beings, most interesting and indeed most *human*. The Scottish theologian, James Eglinton explains: *'A Christian theological account of "being human" is shaped by the perfect human, Jesus Christ, perfect in love and willingly vulnerable. Significantly, that view ties together the embrace of vulnerability with the capacity to love.'*⁵⁷ In this connection, the International Theological Commission of the Roman Catholic church indicates:

⁵⁰ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2015), 73.

⁵¹ Nigel M. de S. Cameron and Amy Michelle DeBaets, Germline Gene Modification and the Human Condition before God, in Ronald Cole-Turner (ed.) *Design and Destiny: Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Human Germline Modification*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, The MIT Press (2008), 105.

⁵² Alan J. Torrance, 'Is there a distinctive human nature? Approaching the question from a Christian epistemic base', *Zygon* (2012) 47(4), 907.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 47(4), 912.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 47(4), 913.

⁵⁵ de S. Cameron and DeBaets, Germline Gene Modification and the Human Condition before God, 105.

⁵⁶ Calum MacKellar, *The Image of God, Personhood and the Embryo*, SCM Press (2017), 119-120.

⁵⁷ James Eglinton, Domination and Vulnerability: Herman Bavinck on Posthumanism in the Shadow of Friedrich Nietzsche, in: Calum MacKellar & Trevor Stammers (eds), *The Ethics of Generating Posthumans*, Bloomsbury Academic (2021) *In Press*.

*Changing the genetic identity of man as a human person through the production of an infrahuman being is radically immoral. The use of genetic modification to yield a superhuman or being with essentially new spiritual faculties is unthinkable, given that the spiritual life principle of man – forming the matter into the body of the human person – is not a product of human hands and is not subject to genetic engineering... A man can only truly improve by realizing more fully the image of God in him by uniting himself to Christ and in imitation of him.*⁵⁸

Human beings, in a way, were always meant to be completely dependent on God in their vulnerability and limitedness. This is because without vulnerability, sacrificial love cannot exist. In Christianity, God also knows what suffering means, creates his children with a capacity to suffer, accepts to suffer for and with his children, and demonstrates his suffering for his children through the marks on his hands, feet and side for all eternity.

Conclusion

Transhumanist and posthumanist ideologies are often presented in an extremely optimistic manner, emphasising a very exciting future brought about by the ingenuity of humanity to harness technological developments. As the American Protestant theologian, Ted Peters, indicates:

*The transhumanist confidence in the advance of technology draws upon a utopian vision, a vision of future human fulfillment or even posthuman fulfillment in a kingdom where rational intelligence has transcended its previous biological imprisonment. The information pattern which is our mind will be transferred from biological brains to computer substrates or even the cloud, escaping the vicissitudes of bodily disease, deterioration, and death. We will become Homo cyberneticus. Not only as individuals but also as a social community and even as a cosmic community we will experience ecstatic human flourishing, the abundant life which previous religious visionaries could only dream of.*⁵⁹

But interestingly, the concept of transhuman and posthuman beings is not new. For instance, the story of *Frankenstein* published in 1818 by the English novelist Mary Shelley (1797-1851) tells the story of a transhuman monster, generated by a scientist named Victor Frankenstein. But it is a story which can also be used as a warning to any individuals seeking to bring transhuman and posthuman persons into existence. For example, Frankenstein looks forward with excitement, at first, to the day when his new being would come into existence: ‘A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs’.⁶⁰ But the book soon reveals how mistaken he was, when the monster he generates indicts Frankenstein with all his suffering and loneliness:

*Unfeeling, heartless creator! You had endowed me with perceptions and passions, and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind. But on you only had I any claim for pity and redress, and from you I determined to seek that justice which I vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form.*⁶¹

In a similar way, it is very likely that future transhuman and posthuman persons will feel angry and bewildered if they are not procreated from the embodied love of their parents. Again, this is movingly illustrated by Frankenstein’s creature and his search for identity. Indeed, though Frankenstein had intended his creature to be attractive, the experiment is a disaster and results in a monster who he then completely rejects and abandons to his own predicament. But the nameless creature goes in search for his generator since he realises that Frankenstein is the real origin and cause of his very existence and life, and that he must be the answer to his deep existential angst. The monster, in a way, is looking for answers as to why he

⁵⁸ International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2002) paragraph 91.

⁵⁹ Ted Peters, *Playing God with Frankenstein*, *Theology and Science*, (2018) 16:2, 145-150, (147).

⁶⁰ In David H. Guston, Ed Finn and Jason Scott Robert (eds.), *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press (2017), 37.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

was created while seeking to understand the deep sense of rejection and abandonment he experiences. His anguish and distress are deeply moving in his exclamation: *'My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.'*⁶²

Likewise, it is possible that new transhuman and posthuman persons will feel completely lost in their very existence and identity, making their generation deeply problematic and even unethical because of all the likely suffering they may experience.

To conclude, it may be appropriate to return to Genesis 1:26-31 which emphasises God's wonderful creation:

*Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness'...
So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them...
God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*

In transhumanist and posthumanist ideologies, however, this could be replaced with:

*Transhumanists saw all that God had made, and it was very insufficient.
They were certain that they could do far better.*

But in attempting to become like God, or even better than God, transhumanists can only cheat at the game of playing God – a game that requires sacrificial love.

Dr. Calum MacKellar

⁶² Guston, Finn and Robert (eds.), *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds*, 106.

Relationships and Sex Education in School: Some Good News!

Perhaps nowhere in our society is the rejection of Christian belief more obvious than in the area of sex and relationships. The attendant problems of shattered relationships and broken homes represent a betrayal of trust which fosters deep insecurity. As we have departed further from any belief in norms and boundaries, some are trying to erode even the biological distinctions between male and female, with tragic consequences for young people. Today's youth can be encouraged to interpret normal adolescent insecurities as signs they are transgender, potentially leading to irreversible hormonal and even surgical treatment. Against this background, the preciousness of what God has done in making us male and female and the beauty of marriage stands out more starkly. The church community should also stand out, called out from the world, our imperfect relationships with one another nevertheless pointing beyond us to the love of Christ for his people.

It would be easy to be discouraged by the moral decline in our society and the pressure that is often felt by members of our churches, none more so than by our children and young people. They are too often marginalised in their views, not just by their peers at school but by teachers themselves. However, recent good news gives us cause to praise God and strengthens the opportunity for Christians in England to be an influence for good in our schools, an opportunity which we must avail ourselves of in faithfulness to our Lord.

On September 24, the Government released two pieces of supplemental guidance for schools: '*Teaching about relationships, sex and health*' and '*Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum*' (available online at bit.ly/RSE-teaching and bit.ly/RSE-planning). These respond to the frankly appalling teaching in some schools, giving them strong direction.

First of all, there is a recognition that people hold different opinions on issues of relationships and sex, and on 'equalities issues'. Schools must treat these views with respect and, in particular, have a duty to teach about them in a fair and balanced way:

...[schools] must... secure that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views... the meaning of political issues does not refer solely to the discussion of party politics... political views... may include... equalities issues, religion...

Schools should not, for example, promote same-sex marriage. They may teach that there is provision for same-sex marriage and encourage respect for people who enter into same-sex relationships, but if discussing the merits of same-sex marriage, they would also have to present fairly the view of those opposed to it. This may be a challenge for some teachers who might never have seriously engaged with such views, so the guidance directs schools that they:

might also consider activities that support teachers to reflect on their own values around the subject and consider ways to present an unbiased and evidence-based curriculum to pupils.

In fact, legislation already directs all schools in England to teach:

the nature of marriage and civil partnership and their importance for family life and the bringing up of children. (Education Act 2002, s.80A 2ai)

We might be dismayed by the equating of civil partnership and marriage. Nevertheless, the nature of marriage and its importance must be taught. The new guidance, furthermore, instructs schools that they must be careful in their choice of teaching resources used:

You should assess all resources carefully to ensure they are age appropriate... and are in line with your school's legal duties in relation to impartiality... When deciding if a resource is suitable, you should consider if it... is evidence-based and contains robust facts and statistics.

There is indeed robust evidence about the benefits of marriage, for example in the recent report from the Centre for Social Justice, *Family Structure Still Matters*, available online. Naturally, schools must be sensitive in how they address this, bearing in mind the family backgrounds of their pupils. Nonetheless, schools should not deny the clear evidence of the benefits of marriage. This knowledge could inform some of the most important decisions they will make in their lives.

The new guidance reserves some of its strongest words for schools which allow groups to come into school to teach children about transgender issues:

You should not reinforce harmful stereotypes, for instance by suggesting that children might be a different gender based on their personality and interests or the clothes they prefer to wear... teachers should not suggest to a child that their non-compliance with gender stereotypes means that either their personality or their body is wrong and in need of changing... Materials which suggest that nonconformity to gender stereotypes should be seen as synonymous with having a different gender identity should not be used and you should not work with external agencies or organisations that produce such material.

This rules out organisations such as Mermaids, which teach that someone's gender sits on a scale from 'Barbie' to 'GI Joe'. They suggest those who have a gender that doesn't match the one they were 'assigned at birth' are transgender and may consider medical treatment to 'confirm' their true gender. There have been well-founded concerns about the materials some schools expose children to. The new guidance helpfully instructs schools not to expose children to over-sexualised content, especially in primary schools.

Parents in our churches can be encouraged to speak up where schools fail to abide by these requirements. The new guidance states:

When planning their curriculum, state funded schools should be mindful of the requirement under the Human Rights Act 1998 to respect the right of parents to ensure education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.

This is in addition to the existing duty of schools to consult parents before they write their policy on Relationships and Sex Education. If all else fails, parents can withdraw their children from sex (not relationships) education and the additional guidance tells schools:

Stating clearly exactly what aspects of sex education are covered in what terms and years is helpful to allow parents and carers to make this decision.

In fact, the law already directs schools to provide relationships and sex education which is '*appropriate having regard to the age and the religious background of the pupils.*' (Education Act 2002, s.80A 2b)

Consultation is a key opportunity for schools to find out about the religious background of pupils and to understand the implications of those religious beliefs for relationships and sex. This is a significant opportunity for Christians to wisely explain a Christian view and, in so doing, influence schools for good. There may also be opportunities for Christian ministers. The statutory guidance for schools notes the importance of positive relationships between the school and local faith communities to create a constructive context for the teaching of these subjects. This is a good opportunity for church leaders to build relationships with schools and help them understand religious viewpoints, assisting schools in fulfilling their legal duty.

By firmly and winsomely taking a stand on these issues, we can safeguard our own children and benefit other children and society at large. Let us take this opportunity and pray God will use us to be salt and light in this crucial area. For further information, please see The Christian Institute's guides to Relationships and Sex Education available at bit.ly/CIRSEGuide or in hardcopy by phoning 0191 281 5664.

John Denning

The Spiritual Impact of Coronavirus on Older People

It would not be an understatement to say that the last eight months have been turbulent and disconcerting for many people in our society. The mental health impacts of lockdown and the on-going restrictions have been well discussed. Older people have experienced extremely demanding circumstances particularly through loneliness and isolation. A number of practical but partial responses have been developed in society which in many cases have reduced the impact, if only to a small degree.

Many churches have sought to respond to the new situation in the best way they can and, alongside using technology to maintain preaching and teaching ministries, imaginative and practical ways of supporting people in their own homes have been developed. However, there is one aspect of the situation that has hardly been discussed, if it has been discussed at all – the damage the restrictions have brought to the spiritual health of those who are older.

Emotional and spiritual responses are always very personal and individual, and this must never be forgotten, so it is dangerous to draw conclusions that are applicable to everyone. At the heart of pastoral concern and support is the ability to distinguish between different reactions to events, and to both understand their causes and know the best way to bring comfort and care to each person.

There are, of course, a plethora of demands on church leaders at this time and the needs of older people are not always easily recognised, sometimes because they may not be that well understood. This article seeks to explore these matters so that pastors and others may respond more effectively.

Basic Facts about Older People

It is estimated that about one million older people in the UK live alone. There are also one million older people who have no children to look to for support (and a lot more do have children but do not receive adequate help from them). Four million older people have no access to the internet, and many who do are not especially competent in using it. Seventy percent of people over 60 have a hearing deficiency which makes the wearing of masks a problem for communication, and thus a significant isolating factor. (As a wearer of hearing aids myself, I find I tend to back off from conversations that involve several people or someone who is wearing a face covering). It is estimated that about half of older people are now showing signs of depression since lockdown began. Alongside other aspects of ageing these few facts illustrate the need for attention to be given to older people at this time.

A report by AgeUK⁶³ observes that, according to research, ‘as many as a third of older people really are struggling and, *given the reluctance of this age group to admit their difficulties and ask for help*, we suspect that in reality the numbers affected are considerably higher – running into millions, without doubt’ (emphasis mine). This point needs to be borne in mind when dealing with older people. It is part of their culture not to open up about their needs, so we should not excuse our lack of attention because ‘they never said anything’. Surely there is a duty on those who care for older people to explore and discover the truth; love, gentleness and spiritual perception can open many doors.

Loneliness

The chief impact of the pandemic has been in terms of reduced social contact and consequent loneliness. Having said that, we must remind ourselves that there is a major difference between loneliness and isolation; being alone does not necessarily equate with feeling lonely. Loneliness is essentially about disappointed expectation. That is why two people can have remarkably similar experiences of reduced social contact, and yet one feels much more lonely than the other. Each of us has an expectation of relationships and being with others that is built on several factors: our individual personality, our past experience, how we are affected by external forms of information, and physical necessity.

⁶³ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/10/16/lockdown-has-crushed-millions-pensioners-charity-warns>

John is an able preacher and, although quite elderly, engages in an extensive and effective public ministry. He is a most gregarious man who thrives on being with others. He is also a godly man with a high reputation among the many people who know him. A couple of years ago his wife died, leaving him feeling bereft. Until the lockdown he was able to keep himself busy, and although his sense of loss was great, he maintained a positive and contented mindset. Then came enforced isolation, and he did not cope. The feelings of loneliness became overwhelming, and he was immersed in sadness and despair. He still kept up his personal spiritual life; anyone speaking with him would find him becoming more and more animated as the conversation went on. But his overall positivity and cheerfulness had declined. After such an extended period of being restricted in what he was able to do, he decided he would go to live in a care home, just to be with people more than he can be at present. The decision was not based on physical or mental problems; he continues to be extremely healthy and intellectually he is still very sharp. But emotionally and spiritually he is struggling. His need has not really been recognised by his church and so there has been no effort made to address his loneliness.

The recent report by AgeUK¹ which polled 1,364 people made the assessment that ‘millions of pensioners have been crushed by lockdown, with many vulnerable people losing confidence, mobility and functions such as memory.’ It also said that ‘lockdown restrictions had left many vulnerable people isolated and anxious, without the support they needed’. In addition, it warned that Covid-19 has ‘hit the fast-forward button on ageing’, with a substantial group of people left ‘frightened, depressed and very much alone’. It is now well established that loneliness in older people carries a 45% increased risk of mortality and has a health impact similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Loneliness also has a seriously debilitating spiritual effect. One of the effects of the on-going pressure of the pandemic on men and women has apparently been the development of a form of apathy such that they stop trying to comply with regulations out of sheer weariness. There is a parallel to this in spiritual terms: The absence of social interaction, including spiritual conversation, the loss of attendance at corporate church activities and the reduction in encouragement from others to pursue godliness, can result in a form of spiritual lethargy. Furthermore, the absence of interaction with others leads to a diminished sense of personal value; there is often a feeling that ‘nobody cares’ and so ‘I don’t really matter’. For all of us a sense of personal identity is constantly bolstered by the affection and friendship of others. When that is reduced or removed over a sustained period of time, our own self-image is diminished which may, for some, have serious spiritual repercussions, for example the development of doubts: ‘If no-one cares for me, does God still care?’ In the loneliest times the enemy of our souls is not slow to repeat that with emphasis.

Loss of Usefulness and Purpose

Even in normal times older people may lose their feeling of usefulness by the way the church conducts its life. Being of value to others and doing things for others is particularly important to our self-worth. Being made in God’s image we have a desire to serve God and others, so to be unable to do so for an extended period, such as during lockdown, creates a void that diminishes our sense of purpose. Melancholy and feelings of inadequacy may grow.

This is often also reflected in the way older people become excessively self-deprecating and even reluctant to accept offers of help. There is a mixture of embarrassment over their feelings (‘mature believers should be stronger than this’) and also a genuine sense that there are others who deserve attention more. These feelings may not be easily expressed but they constitute a genuine spiritual need.

In the Lancet Healthy Longevity journal an article entitled ‘A life-course model for healthier ageing: lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic’⁶⁴ the authors say, ‘Older people are also vulnerable to indirect impacts of COVID-19, including food insecurity, social isolation and financial instability.’ These unexpected consequences of the virus lead to increased insecurity for older people ‘especially when public health recommendations insist on isolation from friends and loved ones’. The Daily Telegraph suggested that

⁶⁴ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhl/article/PIIS2666-7568\(20\)30008-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhl/article/PIIS2666-7568(20)30008-8/fulltext)

‘elderly people could wear ribbons to indicate they are social distancing to help life get back to normal’.⁶⁵ But they may feel like lepers if they are treated differently, and that difference is advertised to warn others to keep clear. Whilst that is the very opposite of what is intended, it may suggest that older people are less capable of fulfilling their duty to social distance like everyone else.

This sense of diminished value is reinforced by the often-repeated comment that younger people are suffering greater loss under lockdown than older people. So it has been suggested that the triple lock on pensions should be removed to release funds to subsidise younger people, as though that is a privilege that they no longer merit, even though they have contributed in a multiplicity of ways for it. Most older people have great sympathy for the plight of younger people, but the linking of their supposed advantages with the difficulties of the younger generation may induce a sense of guilt. If nothing else, such comments add to the general air of depression; Silver Line, a telephone helpline for older people, reports an almost trebling of calls in recent months.

This depressed mood may lead to an undervaluing of the work of grace. Personal devotions lose their attraction, and if pursued because of habit they become cold. ‘I cannot remember when I last had a stimulating time of devotion’ was one brother’s complaint. Yet he still believed all he had ever believed and spoke about trusting the Lord. Such people need help; reassurance and understanding are vital, along with tender challenge which reminds them of the triumph of the grace of God and directs their attention to the Scripture from which new strength can be gained.

Mental Deterioration

All the above have a particular impact on those who have existing mental health problems. A survey by the Alzheimer’s Society⁶⁶ of around 2,000 people affected by dementia revealed that lack of social contact, change to normal routine and reports of the death of friends combine to produce serious deterioration in mental health. Forty-five percent of respondents said that lockdown had had a negative impact on their mental health and 46% of unpaid carers (usually a spouse or family member) reported a loved one with dementia to have experienced stress, anxiety and depression. About a third of respondents spoke of ‘giving up’ or ‘losing hope’. This may account for the high incidence of death among those with dementia⁶⁷. The plight of carers in this is a further serious matter but cannot be explored in this article.

The report of by AgeUK referred to above found that around a quarter of those contacted said they could not walk as far as they used to, one third were conscious of becoming more anxious, and one fifth have suffered a deterioration in their memory. Two thirds felt less confident taking public transport, while two in five were worried about going to the shops and a quarter were even unsure about spending time with their family.

Many in our churches suffer from dementia. Of those whom I know personally, all but one would say that they have seen significant deterioration during this pandemic, and yet support from their churches has been largely disappointing. (That is understandable given the range of demands on churches at this very difficult time.)

The Fear of Covid

The AgeUK report also stated that ‘fear of the virus, loss of mental and physical capacity, loneliness and isolation and an inability to grieve as normal for those they have lost add up to a potential public health emergency affecting many older people.’¹ The possibility of contracting Covid is utterly terrifying for many; it is a thought that lingers in the mind nearly all the time. Even the things that bring most joy – visits from family and especially grandchildren – are now tainted with fear. Life seems to have little positive about it

⁶⁵ The Daily Telegraph, Monday 22 June 2020.

⁶⁶ ‘Lockdown’s side effect: mental health deterioration of people affected by dementia, with third giving up’ The Spectator, 4 July 2020.

⁶⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-53739223>

and seems to be a choice between loneliness and danger. This sense of negativity is only reinforced by the media who seem to delight to report how bad things are – or at least that is how so many older people read the situation. Of course, such a gloomy picture is not representative of all older people, but even among a group of lively over 70s who meet every week on Zoom for Bible study, these thoughts come out at times. It is clear that the temptation to negativity is a reality in the experience of a significant number of older believers.

These observations are drawn from the writer's own experience and conversations with those working with older people around the country. Forty-three percent of those who are shielding are over 70 and therefore are most conscious of the threat the disease poses to them. This legitimate fear is difficult to handle even for the godliest. This, along with isolation and feeling devalued, calls for personal pastoral attention. Many feel discouraged that, as believers, they seem unable to rise above these things. Some pastors have wisely and carefully addressed the fear of death, but I am told by others that their pastor has not dealt with it at all. Death is still an enemy and its power is diminished when people are informed about the biblical teaching.

It is not unusual for older believers to experience a loss of assurance. The losses that come with ageing and the deaths of friends, physical and intellectual decline, and the diminishment of the sphere of influence and usefulness, all combine under normal circumstances to challenge our confidence in God, as they also challenge our confidence in others and ourselves. The impact of Covid adds to the pressures that assail our spiritual well-being; it is a very real problem which is rarely spoken about. In fact, many older people seem to accept that as they age they will lose confidence in many things and that the loss of assurance is one of those things.

Anxiety

There is a phenomenon that is being called 'Covid anxiety'. Articles have been written identifying it and some of its features, and giving advice on how to cope. With job insecurity, financial pressures and family concerns, it is no surprise to see a rise in anxiety across society. Older people are not immune to this and they have their own areas of concern to deal with.

The Office for National Statistics undertook a survey of 6,400 adults of all age groups between 3 April and 10 May to explore their concerns during the pandemic and what their coping strategies were. In particular older people said they were 'worried about the impact of the virus on access to groceries, medications, and other essentials.'⁶⁸ It is probably fair to say that most aspects of lockdown are worse for older people; operations on cataracts, knees and hip joints have all been postponed and affect older people primarily. Dentists are closed, while GPs are only available on the phone (provided you can hear). The general advice for older people is to keep active and get outdoors because this is vital for both mind and body. But what happens if you fall? The thought of admission to hospital is unwelcome and going into a care home following an accident is also not pleasant prospect.

One area of concern that generates particular anxiety is the inability to grieve. A common experience of ageing is the death of friends and peers. In normal times it is possible to sit with loved ones and talk about the loss, and grieve together. Now, numbers attending a funeral are limited; age and shielding may exclude some from participation; providing comfort or sharing a precious memory becomes difficult – the telephone seems so impersonal and Zoom and Skype have their complexities for older people and still do not give that feeling of proximity. All of this generates a world of emotions that burn deep in the soul.

The net effect of these various forms of anxiety can often be the loss of joy and contentment. In Christ we have real and deep-seated joy, and as we get older and learn the ways of God we grow in contentment. But this can be disturbed by anxieties. As Cowper wrote, 'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?'

⁶⁸ <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2020/06/22/how-has-lockdown-affected-people-of-different-ages>

Possible Responses

Fundamental to any response is firstly to understand the issues involved. This article has attempted to set those out – spiritual lethargy, doubts, lost personal value, fear of death, loss of assurance, and loss of joy and contentment. The causes are many and we have considered a few. So what might appropriate responses be?

- Remember the importance of regular and frequent contact – pastors might set aside one afternoon a week to contact those who are struggling spiritually because of Covid. But first such folk have to be identified. So, either by personal visits and telephone calls, or by a structured monitoring system of the older people in the church utilising others in the fellowship, older people should enjoy regular and frequent contact. Where specific problems are identified then the pastor or a leader with skill and experience may make a more personal contact. Some elements of training of people involved may be useful.
- Remember those who have no internet access – many churches send CDs of the ministry to people who are unable to access the church services on video or Zoom. But that can be impersonal and for those who find concentration difficult, and that is a major issue for older people, a more personal approach would be useful. One dear old lady I know rings every person who does not have access to the internet in her church and gives a summary of the preaching and then prays with each person. It takes her a couple of hours each day through the week but those she rings treasure her care and support. That is one imaginative way of meeting this need.
- Remember the ‘Can’t Comes’ – as more and more churches return to holding at least one service in their building it will become clear that not everyone who wants to attend will be able to do so. People who are shielding, clinically vulnerable and, for some, age will be among the factors that mean they cannot come. A large percentage of these ‘can’t comes’ will be older people. In a helpful article published by the FIEC⁶⁹, Johnny Prime suggests that an element should be included in the service that shows that this group are included. It might be a mention of them in a prayer, or a hymn or song that would be well-known to them. It is also possible to ring people during the week after the service and talk with the older person about what they received from the Lord through the ministry. Follow up on the service with these ‘can’t comes’ is a very important way of emphasising that they are still valued.
- Remember the need for one-to-one spiritual stimulation – it is vital to remind those who cannot get out that they are not forgotten by the church or, more importantly, by the Lord himself. That can be done by a whole plethora of means. The way chosen is not as important as the actual doing of it.
- Remember the possibility in some areas of small groups gathering – depending on the area and the particular tier it is in, small group gatherings of two or three can be organised. The fear of breaking the rules often leads to older people to doing nothing. So, guidance and organisation that puts arrangements in place is often a useful way of getting things started.
- Remember the special needs of those with dementia – thoughtful and relevant means must be found to encourage and minister spiritually to those so suffering and any carer who may be involved with them. Simple conversations with them that talk through what would be best are easy to arrange. Then that should be followed up with implementation. It may seem challenging, but it is essential because they are the Lord’s people, and the church has a duty to provide for them.

May the Lord give us grace and wisdom to respond to the need of our older brothers and sisters, to give a cup of water in the Lord’s name and so serve him in a special way.

Roger Hitchings

⁶⁹ <https://fiec.org.uk/resources/remembering-the-cant-comes>

Book review: The Creaking on the Stairs

The Creaking on the Stairs: Finding Faith in God Through Childhood Abuse

Mez McConnell

Christian Focus Publishing, 240pp, 2019, £8.99

This is a must-read book. It is not one to leave the reader with warm feelings inside; rather, it will horrify and shock in places. It should be read because it opens eyes to the extremes of the evil of child abuse but also presents the gospel in a most enlightening and unique way. Rosaria Butterfield says, 'The most disturbing book that I have ever read. I cannot recommend it highly enough.'

The book covers a surprising range of themes; it addresses those who have been abused and, remarkably, also those who abuse; and it speaks to Christians about their duty and opportunities in such situations. Above all, it presents the power and wonder of the gospel.

Mez McConnell is the senior pastor of Niddrie Community Church in Edinburgh. He is the director of 20schemes, a church planting and revitalisation initiative in Scotland. He is also co-director of the Acts29 initiative Church in Hard Places and a worldwide conference speaker (description on fiec.org.uk). His life story is not recounted in this book but in a previous volume entitled, 'Is There Anyone Out There?' Nonetheless his life story is a vital strand running through this book.

Mez's early life was marked by the most terrible abuse and hardship at the hands of his step-mother (and others whom he scarcely refers to in either book). In his teenage years he turned to drugs, crime and violence, and served two prison sentences. Remarkably, in the mercy of God, he came into contact with an evangelical church and was wonderfully converted. Since his conversion the Lord has used him in missionary service in Brazil and over recent years in the church planting work in Scotland.

This present book was written after he wrote a blog post describing his conflicted emotions on hearing of the death of his chief torturer, his step-mother. That blog produced a huge world-wide response from other abuse sufferers who identified with Mez's own anguished and confused reaction to her death. In the blog, which is reproduced at the beginning of the book, he fluctuates between thankfulness and joy that she was dead, and guilt and distress that he, a pastor, should feel that way and not be sad that she may have gone to a lost eternity. This is typical of the courage and honesty of the writer as he recounts his own terrible experiences. So, in light of the responses to his blog, he wrote this book to describe how the gospel alone brings peace and hope in such circumstances. Throughout, he illustrates elements of the gospel with accounts of his sufferings, which can be harrowing, and other experiences in his life which are deeply moving. Throughout there is a biblical analysis that is stirring and immensely helpful.

It is an unusual book; it is not really a biography, but an explanation of the gospel. However, the events of his life run throughout, and the glorious work of Christ is expounded often as he recounts the horrific sufferings and sad experiences of his early life. Its value is that it speaks to a wide range of people in an open and clear manner. It powerfully points readers to the Saviour and the astounding work he has accomplished in his life, death and resurrection.

It should be widely read as a faithful combination of honest reflection and first-class biblical exposition. It radiates hope for those whose hearts and minds have been damaged by the misuse they have experienced. and faces up to the real issues with which victims have to deal. The author admits that there are some questions which cannot be answered, such as, 'Why should I have been subjected to such horrors?' How to handle that inevitable problem is faced squarely and dealt with in a most helpful way. Here a fellow sufferer opens his heart and explains his varied emotions while presenting a developing explanation of the gospel. It is only in the gospel and in working through its ramifications for life that real peace can be found.

This is also a book for Christians wanting to minister to the abused. Often victims cannot find peace because those who try to help do not appreciate the terrors they have had to endure. This book will open

believers' eyes to what really happens in the lives of the abused. Of course, not all will have experienced the level of cruelty, degradation, neglect, and hardship that Mez describes. But in reading of his experience, the reader is taught the depth of anguish that all victims of abuse enter into. It will hopefully engender a sympathy and compassion that is vital if churches are to help those who have suffered. And for those churches that may have seen such wickedness in their midst but downplayed its seriousness, this book will demonstrate what is being covered up.

A question we must all ask ourselves is how would we respond to someone like Mez coming to our church. Would we, like members of the church he went to, open our home to show love and practical Christianity on a daily basis? It will be a challenge to nurture a young believer coming out of such a disordered life but such people are looking for the compassion and love only Christians can provide.

Finally, the book also has things to say to those who abuse. The message is that there can be forgiveness. Mez tells of his own battle to be able to forgive abusers whom he meets in his ministry for the evil they have committed. Here again his courage and honesty shine through. One chapter is an interview with a repentant abuser which analyses some of the issues he has had to face, and the discouragements he has encountered with unhelpful churches. Another is an interview with the pastor of a repentant abuser in which some of the challenges, safeguards and demands are discussed.

It is common for abusers, and especially sex offenders, to be rejected by a local congregation, even to the point of telling them to go elsewhere. I personally know of a truly godly young man, a former sex offender, who is without church fellowship and support because more than one church has banned him. That there is fear and distaste within a church leadership over what the abuser has done is to be expected, but to refuse to engage in a conversation with someone who is genuinely repentant, and gives strong evidence of real faith, is almost unbelievable. Yet as I write this review, I sadly reflect on men who are trying to re-establish their lives after terrible sin and cannot find other believers to help them.

I recommend this book as an eye-opener and also as a brilliant presentation of the gospel.

Roger Hitchings

Book review: 2084

2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity

John C Lennox

Zondervan Reflective, 240pp, 2020, £11.50 Hardback (Amazon)

Professor John Lennox of Oxford University has become a leading Christian apologist, particularly on issues of a scientific nature. I have benefitted from several of his books and was looking forward to this latest one. I have long been interested in Artificial Intelligence (AI), and my first degree was in computing. Early in my career I developed an algorithm for a computer to invest in the stock market. The theory was that computers and algorithms are not hindered by emotional attachments or prejudices towards companies which all human fund managers will inevitably have. Computers will just invest by the numbers, and they should therefore outperform over time. There is a lot of truth in this, of course, but it is not as simple as all that, and there are also other consequences to consider.

There are many benefits of AI. I have sat in the driving seat of a Tesla with my arms folded while it neatly parked itself in a tight spot. One day most cars will be able to do that. Smartphones can recognise vocal instructions' satnavs can tell us the fastest route and guide us out of traffic jams. Use of AI in medical diagnostics is now widespread and can outperform the best human doctors. Lennox points out that the NHS plans to be a world leader in AI in five years' time which will help meet its target of making up to 30 million outpatient appointments unnecessary, saving over £1bn (57). This also serves to illustrate a possible downside: something is lost when we substitute a robot for a human when it comes to medical appointments.

As the title suggests, Lennox is taking his cue from George Orwell's famous novel, *1984*, which presents a dystopian vision of society's use of AI. Lennox also has Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in mind. Lennox quotes Neil Postman:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one... In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. (12)

Lennox also interacts throughout the book with three prominent recent bestsellers. The first two are by Yuval Noah Harari – *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind*, and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. The third book is *Origin* by Dan Brown. These books all speculate on the future direction and impact of AI. At its most basic level, AI is the use of algorithms in computers to achieve something like the examples above. All that the computer is doing is following a set of instructions. If the computer fails to achieve the task accurately then it is the algorithm that is at fault, not the computer, and the algorithm was provided by human intelligence. In this sense, as Lennox notes, 'the "artificial" in artificial intelligence is real' (26).

AI is very broadly discussed and often misunderstood, however. Lennox, following others, likes to differentiate the vision of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) which expects that we will one day be able to construct a super-intelligent machine which can simulate equal or greater intelligence to a human being. This is highly controversial, to say the least, and there are prominent intellectuals who fear computers developing minds of their own, and others who poor scorn on the whole idea as pure fantasy. I am in firmly in the latter camp, but that does not mean that there are not real concerns with the potential of AI.

One issue raised by AI, as already indicated, is the replacement of humans with machines. This is not always bad. There are areas where machines can clearly outperform humans with less risk and no safety issues, such as in manufacturing. The use of computers for job interviews raises more questions. Some people think that nearly all jobs will be automated in the next 125 years! Will robots really compose top 40 songs or write bestsellers? (65) Personally, I think pastors are safe, but robots have been used to say prayers!⁷⁰ Robots have also been used for caring jobs, but most people think they will never match humans in these areas. Nevertheless, there are serious issues raised by the automation of many millions of jobs.

⁷⁰ <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/9/9/20851753/ai-religion-robot-priest-mindar-buddhism-christianity>

Even more concerning in the near term, is AI surveillance. As Lennox points out, 2.5 billion of us voluntarily wear a sophisticated personal tracker in the form of a smartphone, and almost the same number volunteer information on social media networks. As Lennox says, 'To welcome an ill-regulated, corporate eavesdropper into your house is a dumb, reckless bit of self-bugging. Yet millions, maybe soon billions of us do it!' (68). Personally, I turn off voice recognition systems.

China already uses AI in truly Orwellian ways. They are rolling out a social credit system to monitor the trustworthiness of citizens. People get points for interacting with trustworthy people, keeping fit, or reporting on someone else. 'Anti-social' behaviour, such as associating with 'unsafe' people will lose you points, or get you flagged as 'unsafe' yourself (69). Some Chinese companies are even fitting employees with headgear that conceals technology which can read the users brainwaves to detect emotions (70). Nine million people in China have been blocked from buying air tickets because of low scores on these systems! (70) The possibilities of such surveillance create a dreamworld for dictatorships. Here in the UK 1.2 million CCTV cameras have been purchased from China (72). We are living in something very like Orwell's Big Brother world. One can imagine this progressing into compulsory wearing of a tracking device like an Apple watch which monitors your position and conversations. Attempts to remove the device could result in a lethal injection (107).

Another issue raised is transhumanism – the idea that humanity can be enhanced by technology. Some already exists to enable paralysed people to type with their minds (104). Then there is germline genetic engineering with very serious ethical consequences. Harari actually believes that physical death is now merely a technical problem awaiting a medical solution (85). Lennox rightly explains that death is an inevitable consequence of the fall (159), but Harari's view is undoubtedly becoming more influential in our society.

The last several chapters of Lennox's book attempt to provide a biblical perspective on all this. Lennox rightly argues that humans are distinguished from machines in multiple ways. Humans are firstly conscious; machines can never be such. Humans are also spiritual beings, not merely material. Humans have free will, no matter how much contemporary philosophers or scientists may debate this. Computers merely follow instructions. Humans can indeed be upgraded or enhanced – by the work of the Holy Spirit in redemption.

What God offers is a real, indeed a spectacular, upgrade, and it is credible, since by contrast with hoped-for AI upgrades, it does not concentrate merely on technological improvements, but on the moral and spiritual side of human character. (170)

In the final chapters, Lennox looks at how AI and AGI may link in with eschatology. It seems likely that the Beast of Revelation 13 will use AI surveillance in a manner similar to China's use of it today. Purchasing will only be allowed if you worship the Beast. Non-conformity will result in execution – perhaps by lethal injection. Some aspect of surveillance technology could be the mark of the Beast. Lennox even speculates that the Beast is some partial realisation of AGI (201). Revelation also envisages world government and it is clear that the financial crisis, climate change and, more recently, Covid-19, serve to encourage moves in this direction.

Lennox concludes that 'Fear of AGI should not prevent believers from making a contribution to the positive aspects of narrow AI to the benefit of all' (224). There are many uniquely human skills and abilities that no machine will ever match. Lennox notes: 'Man thinks he can become God. But infinitely greater than that is the fact that God thought of becoming human' (225). 'Whereas the "artificial" in artificial intelligence is real, the divine upgrades are real and not artificial' (228).

A lot is covered in this relatively short book. I am surprised to find myself more sceptical of AGI than Lennox, but otherwise there is little if anything else I would disagree with here. It is a very useful overview of the issues raised by AI and presentation of a biblical perspective on them. Recommended.

Tim Dieppe

Update on Life Issues - November 2020

Abortion

BPAS and IVF

Here are two abbreviations nobody ever thought they would see juxtaposed. The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) is the UK's leading provider of abortions. According to its website, 'We are the leading specialists of abortion advice and treatment in the UK, taking care of almost 80,000 women each year in over 70 reproductive healthcare clinics nationwide.'

BPAS is a not-for-profit charity, but its trade is abortion. Ann Furedi, its CEO, is an abortion zealot. She has said, 'People talk about it as the lesser of two evils, and I think it's important to recognise that what we do is actually a good thing; it's good.'

BPAS makes its money by terminating the lives of the unborn. Therefore, who is not stunned to learn that BPAS is planning to open a clinic in London for fertility services, such as IVF – starting beautiful lives – in Spring 2021? BPAS and IVF are the oddest of bedfellows. Making unborn children and also killing unborn children is a bizarre industry. The parents of the very same IVF-aborted child could even be double-charged.

Furedi asks, 'So how can a charity, known internationally for its advocacy and provision of abortion services, argue for, and offer, IVF?' Unsurprisingly, in Furedi's mind there is no conflict. She answers, 'Everything is contingent, everything depends on context, and everything is personal. As an organisation, our core value is choice: the self-determination to decide if, when and with whom to have a child. We have helped women to exercise that choice to end pregnancy, now we will help women to achieve pregnancy.'

If you regard abortion services as an acceptable part of women's reproductive healthcare, then maybe BPAS-IVF is not such a weird project. If you regard fertility care and abortion as antitheses, then BPAS-IVF will alarm you.

IVF and ARTs

Fertility treatments 2018

On 30 June, the HFEA published its annual Report entitled, *Fertility treatment 2018: trends and figures. UK statistics for IVF and DI treatment, storage, and donation*. The Report analysed data from all fertility treatments across the UK during 2018. Overall, it reported that during 2018 about 54,000 patients underwent 68,724 fresh and frozen *in-vitro* fertilisation (IVF) cycles and 5,651 donor insemination (DI) cycles at HFEA-licensed fertility clinics throughout the UK. Other headline findings included a surge in ova and embryo freezing, increasing IVF success rates for some, a decrease in multiple births and a decrease in NHS funding for fertility treatments.

Since 2013, the number of ova and embryo storage cycles have increased five-fold (523%) from 1,500 to just under 9,000 cycles in 2018 as freezing techniques improved and became more commonplace, and patients looked to future use as age, career and marriage prospects impacted on their options. Frozen embryo transfer is rapidly gaining on fresh as the favoured transfer protocol – fresh transfers decreased by 11% (48,391 to 42,835) between 2013 and 2018, while frozen transfers almost doubled (13,421 to 25,889) accounting for 38% of all IVF cycles in 2018. Vitrification is the new IVF snow queen.

The average birth rate per embryo transferred for all IVF patients was 23% – a stubbornly static statistic. Even so, rates have steadily increased for all patients aged under 43. Age is still a key factor in IVF outcomes, with younger patients reporting higher success rates. Birth rates for patients under 35 years old were 31% per embryo transferred, compared with below 5% for patients aged 43 and above when using their own ova.

The live birth rate per embryo transferred remains above 20% for each of the first three cycles of IVF

treatment. Using donor ova increased considerably the chance of a live birth to above 25%, but only 18% of patients aged 40 and older used donor ova.

The multiple birth rate decreased to 8% in 2018 for the first time – a record low. Fertility clinics have been working towards a target of 10% of women who become pregnant with twins or triplets – multiple births are still the biggest health risk to IVF mothers and their babies. Transferring more than one embryo has no significant impact on the chance of a live birth but results in a 32% multiple birth rate for patients under 35.

The level of NHS funding for fertility treatment varies across the UK with 60% of cycles funded by the NHS in Scotland. This compares with 45% in Northern Ireland, 41% in Wales and 35% in England.

Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide

UK doctors vote for assisted suicide?

In 2006, members of the British Medical Association (BMA), the UK's largest union, adopted a policy of opposition to assisted suicide. Now, after a February 2020 survey of its members, that opposition has declined. Of the nearly 29,000 responding doctors and medical students (19% of all BMA members), for the first time, 50% believe the law should be changed to allow them to prescribe life-ending drugs for patients to self-administer. That is an approval of assisted suicide rather than euthanasia. A further 39% opposed this and 11% were undecided.

Asked whether the BMA should campaign for a change in the law, 40% said it should, 33% said it should maintain its policy of opposing a law change, and 21% said the BMA should change to a neutral stance and 6% were undecided.

Asked whether they would personally support a law change to allow doctors to deliver the fatal doses, 46% opposed such a change, 37% supported it and 17% were undecided.

Asked whether they would be personally willing in any way to participate in the assisted suicide process, 54% were opposed, 26% were supportive and 20% were undecided. In other words, most of the doctors surveyed did not want to administer the life-ending drugs themselves, meaning they would be committing euthanasia. However, at least a quarter would be willing to presumably prescribe, obtain, prepare and hand over the lethal dose within the definition of assisted suicide.

BMA members from Northern Ireland, those registered with a licence to practise in the UK (rather than those unlicensed retired and medical students), GPs (as opposed to medical students), and those working in anaesthetics, obstetrics & gynaecology, emergency medicine, intensive care, oncology and palliative care were more opposed to assisted suicide. Significantly, these latter groups are those who work in branches of medicine involving frequent contact with, and experience of, terminally-ill patients.

The BMA emphasised that the poll was not a vote and did not commit the BMA to any change in its formal opposition to assisted dying, explaining, 'These detailed findings will make for an in-depth, considered debate on the future of the BMA's policy when our members meet at the association's next annual meeting in the summer 2021. It is possible that doctors will then call for a formal change in the union's stance on assisted suicide.'

Unsurprisingly, the interpretation of the poll's results have been varied. Humanists UK, which supports the legalisation of assisted dying, described the survey as a 'landmark' moment and said, 'The BMA looks like it must end its policy of opposing assisted dying.' Dignity in Dying responded, 'This is a historic vote and shows the majority of doctors support greater choice at the end of life. The BMA's official opposition to assisted dying is completely unrepresentative of its members.' On the other hand, the Care Not Killing group said, 'We are seeing strongest opposition to changing the law from those medics actually working most closely with terminally ill, elderly and disabled patients, compared to those who work in other non-related fields.' And Baroness Finlay, professor of palliative care, has written, 'Whatever view as a society we

may take on this complex subject, one thing is clear: assisting people to take their own lives is not a role for doctors. Decisions that involve balancing rights for some against protection for others are for the courts, not the consulting room.'

Last year, the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) faced criticism and a legal challenge from its members after it moved from a stance of opposition to one of neutrality based on the results of an online survey. Its poll found that 43.4% of respondents said it should oppose the legalisation of assisted suicide, 31.6% said it should support legalisation, and 25% said it should be neutral. Robert Buckland, the justice secretary, told the House of Commons last year that, 'A change to the law in this sensitive area is a matter of conscience and a matter for Parliament rather than one of Government policy.'

Genetic Technologies

CRISPR babies still too risky

Editing genes in human embryos could one day prevent some serious genetic disorders from being passed down to future generations. Maybe. But for now, the technique is too risky to be used in embryos destined for reproductive purposes. So concludes the Report of a high-profile international body, *The International Commission on the Clinical Use of Human Germline Genome Editing*.

The Commission was formed after the Chinese biophysicist Dr He Jiankui shocked the world in 2018 by announcing that he had edited human embryos that were then reproductively implanted in an effort to make the resulting children resistant to HIV infection. That work, which led to the birth of twin girls, was widely condemned by the scientific community and resulted in prison sentences for He and his two colleagues.

On 3 September, the Commission published *Heritable Human Genome Editing*, a hefty 212-page document containing 11 Recommendations. It is the result of discussions by experts from 10 countries convened by the US National Academy of Medicine, the US National Academy of Sciences and the UK Royal Society. Overall, it agrees with other recent reports that have argued against deploying gene editing in the clinical setting until researchers are able to address safety worries, and also when the public has had a chance to comment on bioethical and societal concerns.

The Associated Press release stated, 'Human embryos whose genomes have been edited should not be used to create a pregnancy until it is established that precise genomic changes can be made reliably without introducing undesired changes – a criterion that has not yet been met by any genome editing technology. Heritable genome edits can be passed down to future generations, raising not only scientific and medical considerations but also a host of ethical, moral, and societal issues. Extensive societal dialogue is needed before any country decides whether to permit clinical use of heritable human genome editing – making alterations to genetic material of human eggs, sperm, or any cells that lead to their development, including the cells of early embryos – with the intention of establishing a pregnancy.'

It continues, 'If a nation decides that heritable human genome editing (HHGE) is permissible, initial uses should be limited to the prevention of serious monogenic diseases, which result from the mutation of one or both copies of a single gene – for example, cystic fibrosis, thalassemia, sickle cell anemia, and Tay-Sachs disease', the Report says. For these cases, HHGE should only be considered when prospective parents who are at known risk of transmitting a serious monogenic disease have no option or extremely poor options for having a biologically related child who is not genetically-affected without the editing procedure, due to genetic circumstances or the combination of genetic circumstances and fertility issues.'

In other words, the CRISPR-Cas9, and similar technologies, is not presently ready for clinical application. Though such techniques offer a fairly precise way to edit the genome, they have been shown to generate some unwanted, off-site changes to genes as well as a range of different outcomes even within cells of the same embryo. Furthermore, the Report – which reviewed the scientific and technical state of heritable gene editing, rather than strictly bioethical questions – advocates the formation of an international committee that evaluates developments in the technology and advises political leaders and regulators on its safety and utility.

Heritable Human Genome Editing is a scholarly approach to a complex issue. It is readable, international in content and conservative in tone. It is to be cautiously welcomed. However, its great lacunae is any in-depth discussion of the bioethical aspects of heritable genome editing – they are numerous, complex and essential. If, and when, the scientific and technical aspects are sorted out, the human editing project must not be allowed simply to go ahead without vigorous discussion of its ethics. Another report, anticipated by the end of 2020 and coordinated by the World Health Organization, is expected to deal more fully with the issues of ethics and governance.

Stem-cell Technologies

3D printing cardiac organoids

Here is a fascinating incongruence – the physicality of 3D printing and the corporeality of a beating human heart. After years of trying, a research group at the University of Minnesota has finally achieved the implausible.

Previously the scientists had followed a sensible protocol. They used human induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) and differentiated them into cardiac cells. They then used 3D printing technology to graft them onto an extracellular matrix to give them structure. Sensible, but ineffective. The cells never reached a critical density to allow for the formation of beating organoids.

The research team was ready to abandon the project. Then, according to Professor Brenda Ogle, the lead researcher at the Department of Biomedical Engineering in the University of Minnesota College of Science and Engineering, the unexpected occurred. Two of her biomedical engineering PhD students, Molly Kupfer and Wei-Han Lin, suggested trying printing the stem cells first. Eureka!

By 3D printing the stem cells and allowing them to reach a critical density before they were differentiated into heart cells, the team was able to demonstrate that it is possible to grow 1.5cm beating-heart organoids in less than a month. Professor Ogle declared, 'I couldn't believe it when we looked at the dish in the lab and saw the whole thing contracting spontaneously and synchronously and able to move fluid.' Some call it scientific serendipity.

Of course, these lab-grown, mini, beating, heart organoids are nowhere near as complex as a fully developed human heart, but this work should advance cardiac research and treatments. Moreover, as Ogle has said, 'We can introduce disease and damage to the model and then study the effects of medicines and other therapeutics.'

Details of this ground-breaking discovery were published as 'In Situ Expansion, Differentiation, and Electromechanical Coupling of Human Cardiac Muscle in a 3D Bioprinted, Chambered Organoid' by M Kupfer *et al.*, in *Circulation Research* (2020, **127**: 207–224).

Miscellaneous

Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1933 - 2020)

Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a pioneering lawyer, a libertarian advocate for equality, especially for women's rights, and a pro-abortionist. She was only the second woman ever to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) and for several years she was its only woman member – imagine, eight burly men and little her. On 18 September, she died at her home in Washington from complications of metastatic pancreatic cancer. She was 87.

Though barely five feet tall and weighing about 45 kg, she was a toughie, legally and medically. She beat colon cancer in 1999 and early-stage pancreatic cancer in 2009. In 2014, she had a stent fitted to clear a blocked artery. In December 2018, two small tumours were found on one of her lungs. A medical scan in February 2020 revealed growths in her liver. In July 2020, she released a statement saying that her liver cancer had returned and she was undergoing chemotherapy. Would she retire early? No way! She planned

to stay 'as long as I can do the job full steam'.

She was as precise in her appearance as in her approach to her work. She wore her dark hair pulled back and wore tailored suits by Giorgio Armani. On the court bench she was an active and persistent questioner, but in social settings she tended to say little letting her more outgoing husband speak for her. Yet, into her ninth decade she remained a most unlikely cultural icon. She became known as the Notorious R.B.G., a play on the name of the Notorious B.I.G., a famous Brooklyn-born rapper. The name caught on, as did her image – her serene yet severe expression, that frilly lace collar over her black judicial robe and her eyes framed by those oversized glasses. Young women had her image tattooed on their arms and 'You Can't Spell Truth Without Ruth' appeared on bumper stickers and T-shirts. Biographies of her became bestsellers, documentary films were box office hits. She was an internet sensation. Hers was a late-life rock stardom.

Joan Ruth Bader was the Brooklyn-born daughter of Ukrainian Jews. Her father, Nathan Bader, immigrated to New York with his family when he was 13. The family owned small retail stores, including a fur store and a hat shop – money was never plentiful. Her mother, Celia (née Amster), was born four months after her family's own arrival. Ruth, as she was formally known, though nicknamed Kiki, was born on 15 March 1933. She grew up in Flatbush, a low-income district of New York. She was essentially an only child – an older sister, Marilyn, died of meningitis at the age of 6 when Ruth was 14 months old. Her mother died of cancer, aged 47, on the day before Ruth's graduation from James Madison High School.

In 1950, Ruth Bader arrived at Cornell University on a scholarship. During her first year, she met a second-year student, Martin (aka Marty) Ginsburg. For the 17-year-old Ruth it was love at first sight. 'He was the only boy I ever met who cared that I had a brain', she frequently recalled in later years. By her third year, they were engaged, and they were married after her graduation in 1954. Theirs was a lifelong romantic and intellectual partnership of opposites – she was reserved, choosing her words carefully, he was an ebullient raconteur.

Following their marriage, they moved to Oklahoma where Marty Ginsburg served for two years as an Army officer. Ruth applied for a government job at the local Social Security office. She was offered a position as a claims examiner, but when she informed the personnel office that she was pregnant with her first child, the offer was withdrawn. Instead she accepted a lower-paid clerk-typist job. Years later, such adverse employment incidents and ingrained assumptions that limited women's opportunities were to become the focus of Ginsburg's life work.

Meanwhile, law studies took her to Harvard University. When her husband found work in New York City, she transferred to Columbia Law School. Despite coming top of her class, she struggled to find employment there. 'I was Jewish, a woman and a mother', she explained. Eventually she found work as secretary to a federal judge in New York, but only by reassuring him that she would never wear trousers to work.

By 1963, she was a professor at Rutgers Law School. While undertaking a study of Swedish civil law at Lund University she was impressed by Scandinavian thinking on gender equality. Feminism was flourishing in Sweden, and it was commonplace for women to combine work and family obligations.

In addition to teaching, she began volunteering to handle discrimination cases for the New Jersey affiliate of the radical American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). These cases included complaints by school teachers who had lost their jobs when they became pregnant. In 1972, the ACLU created a Women's Rights Project and hired Mrs Ginsburg as its first director. It was under the auspices of this ACLU project that she developed her strategy to persuade the courts that official discrimination on the basis of sex was a harm of Constitutional dimensions. It was a daunting uphill task. Yet between 1973 and 1978, Ginsburg presented six sex discrimination cases before the SCOTUS, and won five.

Though ardently in favour of a woman's right to choose, she was a critic of *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court's 1973 decision establishing a constitutional right to abortion. In a speech at New York University Law School in 1993, several months before her nomination to the Supreme Court, she criticised the ruling as having 'halted a political process that was moving in a reform direction and thereby, I believe, prolonged

divisiveness and deferred stable settlement of the issue.’ She maintained that the SCOTUS should have issued a narrow rather than a sweeping ruling, one that left States with some ability to regulate abortions without prohibiting them. Nevertheless, on abortion she stubbornly declared that ‘the Government has no business making that choice for a woman’.

In 1993, President Clinton had a seat to fill on the SCOTUS. It was his first nomination to the Court and he carefully searched for the right candidate – some turned him down. Then there was Ruth Bader Ginsburg. After a 90-minute meeting with her on 13 June, the President has made up his mind. He phoned her with the news later that night. The next day, at the announcement ceremony in the Rose Garden of the White House, Clinton said, ‘I believe that in the years ahead she will be able to be a force for consensus-building on the Supreme Court, just as she has been on the Court of Appeals.’ Judge Ginsburg replied with a tribute to her mother. She declared, ‘I pray that I may be all that she would have been had she lived in an age when women could aspire and achieve and daughters are cherished as much as sons.’ It brought tears to Clinton’s eyes.

During her SCOTUS nomination hearings, addressing the Senate Judiciary Committee, Ginsburg said her approach to judging was neither ‘liberal’ nor ‘conservative’. She did, however, make clear that her support for the right to abortion, despite her criticism of *Roe v. Wade*, was unequivocal. Her subsequent appointment was confirmed on 3 August 1993.

Again, on abortion, Justice Ginsburg invariably displayed her true colours. In 2020, in *June Medical Services v. Russo*, she voted to strike down a Louisiana pro-life law that would save the unborn from abortion and protect women’s health by requiring abortionists to have hospital admitting privileges for patient emergencies. She questioned the necessity of the law, arguing that most women who get abortions do not require medical treatment afterwards. On 29 June, the SCOTUS announced, in a 5 v. 4 decision, that the 2014 Louisiana law was unlawful.

In 2016, she joined the majority for *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt*, a case which struck down parts of a 2013 Texas law regulating abortion providers. She claimed the law in question was not aimed at protecting women’s health, but rather to impede women’s access to abortion. In 2007, she was in the minority of a 5 to 4 decision in *Gonzales v. Carhart* which upheld a federal law restricting partial-birth abortions – she considered that the procedure was not safe for women. In 2000, in *Stenberg v. Carhart*, she joined in the Court’s majority opinion striking down Nebraska’s partial-birth abortion law. Ginsburg’s unbounded pro-abortion ideology paraded itself finally in 2020, when she voted to force the Little Sisters of the Poor to pay for abortion drugs within their healthcare insurance plan.

Her husband, Martin, became a highly-successful tax lawyer yet he happily gave up his lucrative New York law practice to move with her to Washington DC in 1980 when she was appointed to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. He taught tax law at Georgetown University’s law school. He was also a talented cook compared with his wife who was, by her own admission, terrible – apparently her children forbade her from entering the kitchen.

The Ginsburgs lived next to the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where they frequently attended the opera and ballet. Their 56-year marriage ended with his death from testicular cancer in 2010 at the age of 78. In his final days, he left a note, handwritten on a yellow pad, for his wife to find by his bedside. It began, ‘My dearest Ruth. You are the only person I have loved in my life, setting aside, a bit, parents and kids and their kids, and I have admired and loved you almost since the day we first met at Cornell. What a treat it has been to watch you progress to the very top of the legal world!!’ Their two children, Jane, a professor at Columbia Law School, and James, a record producer of classical music and the founder of Cedille Records in Chicago, survive their parents, along with four grandchildren.

Ruth Ginsburg was a non-observant Jew. After the two days in repose at the Supreme Court building, she lay in state at the Capitol. She was the first woman and first Jew to lie in state there. On 29 September, she was buried beside her husband at the Arlington National Cemetery. What a gifted and strong-minded woman she was. Yet one thing she lacked ... (Mark 10:21).

Suicide numbers

Numbers of deaths by suicide are increasing in England and Wales – and probably elsewhere too. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has recently called for more research to understand the reasons why.

Figures published in September by the Office for National Statistics refer to deaths in 2019. Overall 5,691 suicides (4,303 in men and boys) were registered in England and Wales during 2019. That is up from a total of 5,420 in 2018. And that means there was 1 suicide every 90 minutes, with an estimate of 1 attempted every 5 minutes. And these figures are probably underestimates.

The figures also show that the suicide rate among men and boys was 16.9 deaths per 100 000, the highest since 2000 and slightly above the 2018 rate of 16.2 per 100 000. The suicide rate among women and girls was 5.3 deaths per 100 000 in 2019, up from 5.0 per 100 000 in 2018 and the highest since 2004.

This is just about the grimmest and saddest issue to review. We are all affected. The suicidal and the parasuicidal are nearby. As mental health is becoming a more widely discussed topic, how much do we understand? Why, for example, is the highest suicide rate among middle-aged men? Surely they are now established in their careers, families and communities. Surely they are now relatively healthy and wealthy. If so, such factors are not the key drivers of suicide. Indeed, suicides are more frequently linked to isolation after divorce, or separation from a spouse, or partner and their children, as well as alcoholism, and lost employment. Men in this group are also often less willing, or too proud, to seek help.

But all of us, including switched-on bioethicists cannot afford to ignore the topic. It can cause untold grief for those 'left behind', but it can also inform our thinking about assisted suicide. Why, for instance, do those doctors who campaign for the legalisation of assisted suicide also run campaigns in their GP practices to help their suicidal patients avoid it?

And figures are expected to be even higher in the coming months and years. Think for example of those with increasingly fragile mental health caused by the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The take-home message? Watch out for those middle-aged men especially and other suicidal people in your family, church, workplace and community. It's a Mark 12:30-31 affair.

USA and Elsewhere

Amy Coney Barrett

With the recent death of Supreme Court judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the opportunity for President Trump to nominate a new member of the 9-person Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) occurred. The rush was on – the uncertain presidential election was on 3 November. Would his candidate be approved in time?

The President went for it. On Saturday 26 September he nominated Amy Coney Barrett. This was bold on several levels. Whereas Ginsburg was a radical abortion activist, Barrett was known to be radically pro-life. If appointed, Barrett would tilt the SCOTUS towards a conservative balance of 6 to 3. Potential challenges to *Roe v. Wade* were openly discussed, with dread by some, but with joy by others.

Who is she? Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, into a family of devout Roman Catholics, she studied English at Rhodes College, Tennessee and then law at Notre Dame Law School, Indiana. She is the 48-year-old wife of Jesse Barrett, mother of seven children, including two adopted from Haiti, and her youngest biological child has Down's syndrome. She tested positive for Covid-19 this summer, but has since recovered. She is a law professor at the University of Notre Dame Law School, where she has taught civil procedure, constitutional law, and statutory interpretation. And she is a judge on the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals.

She is a staunch Roman Catholic and member of the parachurch charismatic renewal organisation People of Praise, which holds, for example, that sexual relationships should occur only between married, heterosexual couples. She believes life begins at conception and has noted how both pro-life and pro-abortion legal experts have criticised *Roe v. Wade* as a bad decision. She also has made several statements about the value of babies in the womb, signed a public letter in 2015 that emphasised 'the value of human

life from conception to natural death’ and has called abortion ‘immoral’.

In a 2006 speech to graduates at Notre Dame Law School, she previously declared, ‘...if you can keep in mind that your fundamental purpose in life is not to be a lawyer, but to know, love, and serve God, you truly will be a different kind of lawyer’.

On 12 October, she began her Senate Judiciary Committee nomination hearings. Before, during and after those hearings she has been aggressively attacked by Democrats, mainstream media, abortion activists, humanists, Planned Parenthood, LGBT activists and many more for her conservative personal and political views and her faith. She would make a great member of the SCOTUS!

And indeed, she will. On 26 October, the US Senate voted 52 v. 48 to confirm Judge Amy Coney Barrett to be the next Associate Justice on the Supreme Court. She took the oath of office later that night. A conservative, constitutionalist, pro-life woman at the Supreme Court. Whatever next? We wait expectantly.

France goes bioethically mad

At 04:00 in the morning on the first Saturday in August, members of the National Assembly of France voted on a number of radical amendments to its bioethical laws. The vote in favour was only 60 v. 37 with 4 abstentions out of a total of 577 Assembly members. In particular, the Assembly approved liberal abortion laws, the creation of genetically-modified embryos, chimeras (animal-human hybrids), saviour siblings, plus state-funded assisted reproductive technologies for lesbian couples and single women as well as ‘shared motherhood’, meaning the donation of ova or embryos between lesbian partners.

This bill, first adopted in October 2019, was a flagship commitment by President Emmanuel Macron at his 2017 election. His position is unequivocal – earlier this month he declared, ‘Everywhere, women’s rights are under attack, starting with the freedom for women to control their own bodies, and in particular the right to abortion.’

This latest political episode has not been an example of sensible democracy. For instance, the debate was held in the middle of summer, discussion time was reduced, and a last-minute, extreme pro-abortion legislative rider was added, which would permit abortion up to birth for the so-called unverifiable criterion of ‘psychosocial distress’ of the mother.

Currently in France, around 220,000 legal abortions are performed every year, though in 2019 the figure rose to a record number of 232,000 abortions, 8,000 more than the previous year. Most of these are performed as medical abortions. Late-term abortions (after 12 weeks of gestation) require medical approval that is legally limited to cases of severe malformation, or supposed unviability outside the womb, or when a mother’s life is endangered. In effect, the proposed legal changes would introduce a ‘right’ to abortion, for any reason, fully funded by the French Social Security.

These revised bioethical regulations will now be returned to the Senate for a second reading, where they will probably be heavily amended, perhaps before the end of this year. The modified law will then be voted on by a joint committee of the two houses. If a consensus cannot be reached, the National Assembly’s decision will be final.

But that is not all. On 8 October, a bill extending the abortion time limit from 12 to 14 weeks without conditions, some to be performed by midwives, and the restriction of conscientious objection, passed its first reading in the French Assembly. A sparsely attended lower house backed the proposed law change by 102 votes to 65. The following weekend, on 10 October, saw thousands join 61 nationwide demonstrations against this draft ‘Law Concerning Bioethics’. ‘Marchons Enfants!’ was their cry.

John Ling

(A fuller version of John’s regular update of bioethical news and views can be found at www.johnling.co.uk)

Latest News of Significant Individual Cases

The following are summaries of the story so far in some of the significant recently-resolved or still unresolved cases involving Christians responding to a wide range of legal, police or disciplinary action against them. Seeking a remedy by means of litigation can be a lengthy process – sometimes taking several years for a closure to be reached. All cases are being handled by the Christian Legal Centre.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 DIY Home Abortions

Back in March, a notice appeared on the government website appearing to allow women to conduct their own medical abortions at home. Following an outcry, the notice was removed from the website, claiming that it had been '*published in error*' and visitors to the website were assured that there would '*be no changes to the abortion regulations*'.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock, told the House of Commons '*There are no proposals to change the abortion rules due to Covid-19*'. Health Minister, Lord Bethell then told the House of Lords '*We do not agree that women should be able to take both treatments for medical abortion at home. We believe that it is an essential safeguard that a woman attends a clinic, to ensure that she has an opportunity to be seen alone and to ensure there are no issues.... It is not right to rush through this type of change in a sensitive area such as abortion without adequate parliamentary scrutiny*'. Just a few days later the Government made an extraordinary U-turn. In spite of all previous assurances, on 30 March, regulations were amended to allow women to abort their child at home.

Christian Concern has challenged the Government's decision by way of judicial review and on Tuesday 19 May, appeared in the High Court via Skype seeking permission to challenge on the basis that it usurps proper parliamentary procedure and that policy changes were not only unlawful but also made without proper parliamentary scrutiny, making it unsafe for pregnant women. Michael Phillips, counsel for Christian Concern, said the 1967 Abortion Act has had '*a coach and horses*' run through it by allowing women to take pills at home during the lockdown and pointed out that '*women's lives have been put at risk because of this amendment.*'

Mr Phillips argued that the Government had failed to fully take into account factors such as the physical and psychological risks to women, the risk of women being coerced into an abortion, the risk of a woman taking abortion drugs prescribed for another person and the risk that they will be taken outside the 10-week gestation limit.

In their judgment Lord Justice Singh and Mr Justice Chamberlain refused permission for a judicial review and said the Government's decision was lawful. Christian Concern appealed and on 18 June, Lord Justice Lewinson granted permission for the case to be heard by the Court of Appeal.

The appeal was heard on 29 July 2020 by Lady Justice King DBE, Lady Justice Nicola Davies DBE and Lord Justice Davies, two of whom had heard a case granting a buffer zone around an abortion clinic in Acton, West London. Their Lordships handed down their judgment on 25 September 2020 refusing permission for judicial review. The case has now been appealed to the Supreme Court.

Michael Overd

Mike Overd is a street preacher in the Bristol area. He came to faith after a career in the army and has been sharing his faith on the streets for the past 12 years. His hard-hitting preaching has put him on a collision course with the Avon and Somerset Constabulary who, when an unruly crowd has gathered, have opted to arrest and charge him rather than the wrongdoers. This had led to Mike having a significant number of detentions in police stations and numerous court appearances. Every time he has been before a court he

has been acquitted of all charges, despite many false allegations being levelled against him. Having got used to the false testimony of his detractors, Mike now records everything that he says to protect himself.

Avon and Somerset Police has sought to prevent Mike's preaching, with a senior office taking out an advertisement in a local newspaper asking people to record his preaching and report anything that they find objectionable. The Police have to date issued Mike with four Section 35 dispersal orders, requiring him to immediately leave the area where he was preaching, and most recently have sought to use the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014 to obtain an injunction in the High Court, suggesting Mike's preaching poses a '*significant risk of harm to others*'. The injunction sought six conditions which aimed to prohibit him from:

- i) Using an amplifier when preaching
- ii) Using a soap box to preach from an elevated position
- iii) Using visual aids and placards, such as signs which say 'repent', 'abortion is murder', or to show medically validated images of the reality of abortion.
- iv) Going within 80 yards of a specific abortion clinic in Taunton
- v) Preaching in a single town for no more than 20 minutes in a day
- vi) 'breaching the peace' through any words or actions in a public space

If the Police had succeeded in their application, any breach of the order would leave Mike vulnerable to arrest or imprisonment for contempt of court. At an earlier hearing at the County Court, PC Charles Gear gave evidence and suggested that '*if the injunction is not granted... this will empower Mr Overd to put lives at risk.*'

On 5 October the case was heard by HHJ Cotter QC who, despite hearing a number of tenuous witness statements from members of the public, ruled that the only restrictions that should be placed on Mike were a ban on him using amplification and a prohibition on him calling anyone a murderer within 80 yards of Millstream Abortion Clinic in Taunton (something he has never done in any event). Nevertheless, he is permitted to hold a sign saying, 'abortion is murder'.

In response to the continued attempts by the police to suppress his preaching, Mike, along with three fellow preachers who have been arrested with him, are bringing a case against the Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset police for harassment, false imprisonment, assault, malicious prosecution and infringement of their rights under the Human Rights Act 1998. The case is being heard in December 2020.

Kristie Higgs

Kristie Higgs, a Christian school worker, was dismissed after she shared with friends two Facebook posts that raised concerns about Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) at another school in the same village, her own child's Church of England primary school.

Kristie, who is a mother of two children, had been working at the Farmor's School in Fairford, Gloucestershire for six years as a pastoral assistant with an exemplary record. Yet, after one anonymous person saw two of Kristie's personal Facebook posts, which shared concerns about sex education lessons at her own child's primary school, she was reported to the academy headteacher with a claim that her posts were 'homophobic and prejudiced to the LGBT community'. Even though the posts were only visible to her friends, Kristie was subsequently sacked.

She was told at a hearing that, for holding and sharing her views, she 'may exert influence over vulnerable pupils who may end up in isolation' and was therefore deemed no longer suitable to work with children. With reference to her child's primary school, Kristie, using her personal Facebook account under her maiden name, had shared two posts. The first began with her writing in capital letters: 'Please read this they are brainwashing our children!' 'Please sign this petition, they have already started to brainwash our innocent wonderfully created children and it's happening in our local primary school now.' The rest of the post, written by another mother, highlighted that a government consultation on proposals to make RSE mandatory for children as young as four was coming to a close, and urged its readers to sign a nationwide petition calling on

the government to uphold the rights of parents to have children educated in line with their religious beliefs.

A similar petition was subsequently signed by over 115,000 people, and was debated in parliament, ironically under a government protocol for freedom of speech and for fostering closer links between public concerns and parliament in an open democracy. This mother wrote conveying that she felt that some aspects of the proposed RSE syllabus, especially children's books with transgender themes, were not right for pupils at her own child's Church of England primary school, and she wanted other parents to be able to make informed decisions. Kristie shared this in her post.

In the second post, Kristie shared an article from Judybeth.com on the rise of transgender ideology in children's books in American schools and added her own comment: 'This is happening in our primary schools now.' These posts, sharing with friends her concern for her child's primary school, were reported to the academy where she was working. The person who reported it remains anonymous.

After an investigation, the academy concluded that Kristie would be dismissed for: 'illegal discrimination', 'serious inappropriate use of social media', and 'online comments that could bring the school into disrepute and damage the reputation of the school.' However, the conclusions by the academy were unfounded. In the conclusion of the disciplinary hearing, the academy admitted in writing that: '*Regarding bringing the school into disrepute... we agree that there is no direct evidence that as a matter of fact that the reputation of the school has been damaged to date.*' Furthermore, despite the clearly religious context, with one of the Facebook posts specifically mentioning Kristie's views on Christian teaching and that 'freedom of belief would be destroyed', the academy claimed: 'We concluded that no action was taken because of your religion. The disciplinary occurred for reasons other than your religion.'

The academy added: '*As an inclusive employer, Farmor's school recognises and protects the statutory rights of its staff. Such rights however are not absolute and we are concerned that you did not demonstrate an appropriate understanding of the school's requirement to respect and tolerate the views of others and to role model such behaviour.*' When Kristie asked whom she had discriminated against, she was told by the academy: '*you had not directly discriminated against one person, rather it was about the words you had used that could be perceived as discrimination.*'

Kristie, a member of Fairford Christian Fellowship, has been supported by her pastor, Gregory Husband, in this case and has turned to the Christian Legal Centre who have helped her to take legal action for unfair dismissal and discrimination. Kristie said: '*I have been punished for sharing concerns about Relationships and Sex Education. I hold these views because of my Christian beliefs, beliefs and views which are shared by hundreds of thousands of parents across the UK. My number one concern has always been the effect that learning about sex and gender in school will have on children at such a young age. As soon as the investigation into the posts began I was repeatedly told: "this is nothing to do with your religion". That was clearly a legal tactic and of course it has everything to do with my religion. I am determined to fight this case and to stand for Christians and all parents across the country who are being silenced for sharing and holding these views.*'

Andrea Williams, chief executive of the Christian Legal Centre, said: '*This case is about the freedom to hold Christian views about what it means to be human. Many Christians have faced pressure for expressing these views in the workplace before, but in this case, Kristie has been dismissed for sharing her views among friends on Facebook. What Kristie shared on Facebook simply reflects the genuine and justified concerns of a parent about the sexual ideology currently being imposed on her own children and thousands of children across the UK. Kristie has not only lost her job, but her whole career is now tarnished with the accusation that for holding these views she is now a danger to vulnerable children. This is despite an exemplary record at the school and in her work with youth in the wider community. If Kristie does not win this case, due to one complaint, she will never be able to work with children again.*'

Kristie's case was heard at Bristol Employment Tribunal from 21 – 25 September 2020. The tribunal rejected her submissions that she had been discriminated against and the case has now been appealed to the Employment Appeal Tribunal.

Richard Page

In May 2019, former magistrate Richard Page lost his appeal at the Employment Appeal Tribunal. The ruling could effectively bar Christians from holding positions in public office if they express a Christian view of marriage and family. The battle is not over for Richard; he ‘remains as faithful as ever to his beliefs and will bring his cases to the Court of Appeal.’ Andrea Williams comments on the judgments.

Disappointingly, but not unexpectedly, Mr Justice Choudhury of the Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) ruled against Richard Page in his cases against the Lord Chief Justice and Lord Chancellor, and against the Kent and Medway NHS Trust. Richard was first punished in 2014 for saying in an adoption matter that a child does best with a mother and a father and eventually removed from his position as a magistrate. He was later also removed from his position as a Non-Executive Director of the NHS Trust for further expressing his belief in media interviews.

As a nation, we should all be very concerned that these rulings may mark another watershed moment in our nation’s history where holding sincere Biblical views can amount to a bar to public office. As Christians, we should do everything in our power to make sure that this is not the case. Richard remains as faithful as ever to his beliefs and will bring his cases to the Court of Appeal. What has perhaps been lost in all of the debate surrounding his cases is the question of who the real Richard Page is. Richard has been supported now by Christian Concern for over five years. We have come to know the man, and his heart, well. While detractors, wishing to score cheap campaigning points, try to paint Richard in a one-dimensional light as merely being a homophobic ex-magistrate, nothing could be further from the truth.

Richard is first and foremost a family man. Beyond raising a wonderful family of his own and being a devoted husband, Richard and his wife Jane took in five hard-to-adopt adolescent foster children over the years. Richard also enjoyed a successful career in finance, the talent for which he brought to the NHS as a Non-Executive Director. He also gave back to the community with more than 15 years of exemplary public service as a magistrate, never having been the subject of negative feedback or complaint prior to the circumstances leading to his removal from the bench. Richard, for all intent and purpose, has been a pillar of society.

When approaching his judgments, I would highlight several points which simply do not withstand scrutiny. In legalese, we would refer to these findings as being made in manifest error. First, both judgments repeat the mantra that Richard was not being punished for what he believed, but the manner in which he expressed that belief. The notion that the manner in which someone expresses a belief and the right to hold a belief are separable however, simply does not withstand scrutiny. It’s a distinction without a difference. It is also not supported by experience; whereby members of the judiciary much more senior than Richard (Lady Hale, the President of the Supreme Court, and Sir James Munby, recently retired President of the Family Division of the High Court of England and Wales, for example) have made similarly contentious statements in the media and received no sanction. The only difference among them were their viewpoints. The latter were applauded for their ‘progressiveness’ whereas Richard was punished for daring to suggest that a child does best with a mother and a father. Precisely stated, it had nothing to do with the manner in which he made his comments (as the manner he did so has been shared by many others who were never similarly scrutinised); it had everything to do with the belief itself.

Similarly, it strains credulity to suggest that Richard brought the independence of the judiciary into question or showed inherent bias any more than did Lady Hale, Sir James, or any number of other prominent judges who have shared their beliefs in a public forum. In fact, the seniority of the other judges I have mentioned, because of their prominent public profiles, had a far greater impact over the public perception of the judiciary than Richard ever could.

Third, in relation to the NHS judgment, the EAT repeatedly made note of the fact that by doing media interviews, Richard went against a direct order from the Trust to inform them of any media interview he might do concerning his case. The truth is that Richard participated in exactly one media interview after receiving the directive from the Trust. That interview was set up and profiled as a general discussion on

intolerance towards Christians and nothing to do specifically with his case. The issue of Richard not following a directive was a very minor part of the original case which has now been conflated exponentially.

Finally, recalling that Justice Choudhury did not believe Richard's right to freedom of religion was engaged because he was punished for how he expressed his belief, and not the belief itself, he nonetheless went on to say that had his faith been involved, he would have come to the same finding because the law allows for interference with a belief where a legitimate aim exists. He suggested that because LGBT people suffer disproportionately from mental illness, that Richard's comments might somehow dissuade them from using the NHS health service. Apart from the absurdity of suggesting that the beliefs of one man in a Non-Executive Directorship would dissuade anyone from seeking medical assistance, the point is also wrong in law.

For the NHS to interfere with Richard's freedom of religion and belief, it requires much more than merely suggesting that a legitimate aim exists to do so. Proportionality and necessity are also required. There were much more tailored means that the trust could have utilised to both engage with the patients they say were particularly vulnerable and allow Richard to enjoy his fundamental freedoms of belief and expression. For example, if the trust was concerned, it could have issued a public statement to achieve this balance, reiterating that Richard was speaking in a private capacity and that his opinions were not necessarily shared by the trust and more so, that his position in the trust was wholly separate from any decisions made in relation to patient care.

What has also been missed in Richard's case is that as a magistrate in the family division, he was doing exactly what he should have been doing. The law requires the family court, in an adoption matter, to serve the best interests of the child. Far from being just a Christian belief, Richard understood that the unique and complementary gifts brought to parenting by a mother and a father is also a fact supported by sociology, psychology and biology. This belief had nothing to do with same-sex couples, and everything to do with what is best for a child. While Richard would never judge anyone for who they are or for their personal circumstances – single parent, same-sex parent, or otherwise – he would nevertheless always endeavour to fulfil his judicial oath by doing what he believed was in the best interests of the child being adopted.

As I have said in the past and will repeat here, we should be grateful for Christians like Richard Page who bravely and dutifully stands in the firing lines so that hopefully you will never have to. Richard has now been given permission to appeal the decision of the Employment Appeal Tribunal. The cases against the Lord Chancellor and Lord Chief Justice, and the NHS have now been joined and will be heard together at the Court of Appeal. Richard's case has been set down to be heard at the Royal Courts of Justice. It is currently a floating case that will commence on either the 3 or 4 November 2020 and is listed for a two-day hearing. Richard is being represented at the trial by leading human rights barrister, Paul Diamond.

Seyi Omooba

A Christian West End actress who was removed from a lead role in a musical for a four-year-old Facebook post that cited the Bible, is set to take a theatre and her agency to court for breach of contract and for anti-Christian discrimination. The case, supported by the Christian Legal Centre, raises the question of whether Bible-believing Christians have the freedom to hold and express mainstream Biblical views in public, without fear of losing their livelihoods. It also raises the issue of whether, as a society, we are allowed to hold and express opinions and interpretations of art, literature and drama in ways that are contrary to LGBT ideology.

On 14 March 2019, Miss Seyi Omooba, 25, from East London, had been given a lead role as Celie in Leicester Curve and Birmingham Hippodrome's co-production of the award-winning musical *The Color Purple*, based on Alice Walker's classic American novel. The casting was announced the same day that Miss Omooba went with her father, Pastor Ade Omooba, an eminent international Christian campaigner and Christian Concern's co-founder, to Buckingham Palace to receive his MBE.

Miss Omooba had developed her raw talent from a young age singing gospel in church and studying performing arts at Anglia Ruskin University. She had already built up a portfolio of performances, among them parts in Hadestown at the National Theatre, Little Shop of Horrors, Spring Awakening, and had played the role of Nettie in the Cadogan Hall production of The Color Purple.

In a review of her full debut in the West End musical, Ragtime, Miss Omooba was described as: 'jaw-droppingly good, and her ferocious gospel vocals...mpin you to your seat. This is her professional debut, and she's someone to watch.' In the production of A Color Purple at Cadogan Hall, Miss Omooba's depiction of the character of Nettie was described as capturing the 'very heart of her character'.

After the cast was announced, however, on 15 March, Miss Omooba was tagged on Twitter by another West End performer, Aaron Lee Lambert, who is not known to her. With a screenshot of a Facebook post that Miss Omooba had posted four-and-half-years ago on 18 September 2014, Mr Lambert wrote, '@seyiomooba Do you still stand by this post? Or are you happy to remain a hypocrite? Seeing as you've now been announced to be playing an LGBTQ character, I think you owe your LGBTQ peers an explanation. Immediately.'

In September 2014, Miss Omooba was a 20-year-old student whose acting career had not even started. She regularly posts about her faith online without any issue, and in this post had written on her personal Facebook page, in the context of the government introducing same-sex marriage legislation, that, '*Some Christians have completely misconceived the issue of Homosexuality, they have begun to twist the word of God. It is clearly evident in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 what the Bible says on this matter. I do not believe you can be born gay, and I do not believe homosexual practice is right, though the law of this land has made it legal doesn't mean it is right. I do believe that everyone sins and falls into temptation but it's by the asking of forgiveness, repentance and the grace of God that we overcome and live how God ordained us to. Which is that a man should leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Genesis 2:24. God loves everyone, just because He doesn't agree with your decisions doesn't mean He doesn't love you. Christians we need to step up and love but also tell the truth of God's word. I am tired of lukewarm Christianity, be inspired to stand up for what you believe and the truth #our God is three in one #God (Father) #Jesus Christ (Son) #Holy Spirit.*'

Miss Omooba received the tweet from Mr Lambert while supporting a grieving friend, and despite being deeply shocked and intimidated, refused to be drawn into an online discussion on the issue. Calls for Miss Omooba to be removed from the cast followed, however, as well as online abuse which included her being called a 'n----er.'

Miss Omooba, who visibly prays before each show and wears a 'Not Ashamed' of the Gospel wristband, had accepted the lead role of Celie after originally auditioning for the character of Nettie, and disagrees with the interpretation that Celie is a lesbian character. The character of Celie in The Color Purple has intrigued readers and critics since it won the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 after its publication the previous year. Set in the Deep South of the US, it's main character, Celie, leads a life of immense struggle at the hands of men, until she briefly finds comfort and friendship with another woman. It was made into a Hollywood film in 1985 and starred Whoopi Goldberg, who described the film and the character of Celie as '*Not really about feminism, or lesbianism, despite the fact that Celie finds out about love and tenderness from another woman.... It has nothing to do with lesbianism. It has to do with, her eyes are opened, now she understands.*' Steven Spielberg, who directed the film, was pressed in 2011 on whether today he would make the 'kiss' scene in the film more explicit, but he said: '*I wouldn't, no. That kiss is consistent with the tonality, from beginning to end, of The Color Purple that I adapted.*'

On 15 March, Miss Omooba received a call from her agency, Global Artists, telling her that pressure was mounting for her to be removed from the show because of her views. She was told that only through retracting the comments and publicly apologising would she be able to continue under their management, which she refused to do. Leicester Curve Theatre and the Birmingham Hippodrome then released a statement on 21 March which led to Miss Omooba's contract being terminated. The theatres claimed in their statement that: 'The play and production are seeking to promote freedom and independence and to

challenge views, including the view that homosexuality is a sin.’ That same day, Miss Omooba was now told by her agency ‘not to make public comment at this point’, without informing and consulting them, which Miss Omooba agreed to do. However, on the 24 March, a blogger based in Nigeria published a fake news article on the story which included a fake quote from Ms Omooba made ‘through her publicist’, saying that homosexuality is an aberration and that she stood by her Facebook post from 2014. The blogger wrote clearly that the article was ‘clearly satirical and was not to be taken seriously’.

Nonetheless, the article was enough for the agency to send Miss Omooba a brief email telling her that she would now be released from their services, and the news appeared in the media within hours - before Miss Omooba had the opportunity to explain that the article had nothing to do with her, which she was only able to do the following day. Even though Miss Omooba chased the agency for a response, it was not until 18 April that they responded saying their decision was final as their confidence in her had been ‘irretrievably eroded.’ This was despite Miss Omooba being entitled to two months’ notice. Since then Miss Omooba has tried to find work in the theatre profession but appears to have been blacklisted. One agency she approached for roles even told her that: ‘Homophobia is illegal. It is not a matter of faith’ and added that the agency would help her once she came ‘to her senses on this matter’ and when she had ‘got away from the ideologies of your entire upbringing.’

The theatre has attempted to avert Miss Omooba’s lawsuit by offering to pay her the full wages she would have received for playing in the performance. However, Miss Omooba has rejected that offer, and will ask the Employment Tribunal for a formal and public ruling that the theatre has acted unlawfully and discriminated against her because of her Christian beliefs.

Miss Omooba said: *‘When I received the email that I was going to be dropped from the cast, I was heartbroken. The theatre has offered me a financial settlement, but I am not in this for the money. For me it’s not about the money or my face – it was about telling and expressing Celie’s story, as I interpret it as a performer, because that is what I love to do. For me, Celie is a complex character. I do not think it is possible to clearly define that she is a ‘Christian’ or a ‘lesbian.’ Celie has to grow up so fast, but in her mind she is just a child trying to navigate through and overcome the many trials and tribulations that life throws at her. ‘The people who know me, know that I have no hatred as a result of my faith; only love. Yet the theatre and the agency gave me the choice of either losing my career or renouncing my faith. I could not do this, not even to save the career that means so much to me.*

I want our society to be more open to both sides of the debate and to accept that many Christians do not believe homosexual practice is right. Even though there are differences in belief, we need to be more loving to each other, we need to understand each other’s struggles - that is what my post in September 2014 was all about. No one should be treated as I have been because of expressing these beliefs.’

Andrea Williams, Chief Executive of the Christian Legal Centre, said: *‘What happened to Seyi Omooba was cruel and has damaged the career of a highly talented young artist for a Facebook post she had made four years ago. Here you have a young Christian woman, with what critics have described as having a ‘ferocious’ talent, being sacked and blacklisted for expressing what the Bible says about homosexual practice, the need for forgiveness and God’s love for all humanity. This is another in a string of cases involving Christians being hounded out of their careers because they love Jesus. The presence of a homosexuality theme in the play is a very poor excuse for discriminating against a Christian actress. If we were talking about a lesbian actress playing a Christian character, nobody would dare to suggest that her sexual lifestyle would make her unsuitable, and that you could fire her without breaking the law. This story sends a chilling message to Christians, not only in the theatre profession but across our society, that if you express and hold mainstream Biblical views, you will be punished and will lose your career if you do not immediately renounce your beliefs. This cannot go unchallenged and we are determined to fight for justice in this case.’*

The tribunal system has been thrown into confusion as a consequence of the pandemic and a case management hearing in April pushed the hearing date back into 2021, despite requests from Ms Omooba’s legal team for her case to be heard via an approved streaming service. This decision of the tribunal is currently being appealed.

Pastor Josh Williamson

Pastor Josh Williamson, of Newquay Baptist Church, was warned by police to keep his views in a 'safe environment' after being targeted by a wave of anti-Christian abuse, including threats of violence and calls for his church to be burnt down. On 13 August 2020, Pastor Williamson responded to an article on a local news outlet's Facebook page, which reported that this year's Cornwall pride would be cancelled. He simply posted: 'Wonderful news!' When asked by an online user why the news was wonderful, he responded saying 'because I don't think sin should be celebrated.' Answering further questions on his views he quoted from the books of John, James, and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. He then shared the news article on his personal Facebook page and commented: 'Hallelujah!! We prayed at our prayer meeting on Tuesday night that this event would be cancelled. We also prayed that the Lord would save the organisers. One prayer answered, now we wait for the second prayer to be answered.'

Organisers of Cornwall Pride searched Pastor Williamson's personal page, took a screenshot of the post, and then tagged Newquay Baptist Church and posted it along with negative comments made by other users about gay pride. By blocking out the names on each comment and mentioning Newquay Baptist Church, it appeared that they had all been made by Pastor Williamson. Online threats followed against the pastor's wife and his head was superimposed onto an image of homosexual pornography, which was then shared online.

Cornwall Pride then called on as many supporters as possible to report the pastor to the police for hate speech/crime. LGBT sympathisers threatened that they would protest at his Sunday services, would seek to have the church's charity status revoked and have Pastor Williamson deported to his native Australia. Following these threats, Pastor Williamson was invited to a meeting by a transgender member of the community. He accepted the invitation, in effort to share his actual beliefs, and met for an hour with two members of Cornwall Pride to discuss matters. At the meeting, Pastor Williamson reiterated his stance and Christian beliefs and welcomed members of the LGBT community to attend his church. Hoping to help them understand his position and beliefs, Pastor Williamson ended the meeting by sharing a leaflet, with permission, on what the Bible says about homosexuality.

Images of the leaflet were then shared throughout the LGBT community, creating a perception that Pastor Williamson was distributing them widely, which he was not. Further calls were made to the police asking them to investigate Pastor Williamson for a 'hate crime'. One post in an LGBT group called for Newquay Baptist Church, which often houses families, to be burnt down. Another user agreed, responding: 'LET'S BURN A CHURCH! LET'S BURN A CHURCH.' Another user threatened to perform a mass sexual orgy at the church, calling on the group to assault anyone who handed them the leaflet.

Reporting the threat to Devon and Cornwall Police, who are Cornwall Pride's sponsor, Pastor Williamson was told that the situation was 'complex' and that they did not believe the threat would materialise. The police stated that they were working with both sides to pacify the situation, but also stated to Pastor Williamson that he should make sure he did not offend anyone in the LGBT community in future to avoid breaking the law.

Pastor Williamson said: 'My family and I, and our church community, have been very concerned by the level of anti-Christian abuse and threats of violence that we have been targeted with over the past few weeks. The police have not formally spoken to me about any hate crime or sought a witness statement to look at the various online comments which have included threats to burn down our church. As Christians we seek to speak the truth in love and would readily welcome all people to our services. The Bible, however, proclaims a message of repentance which calls on all people to turn from their sin and to trust in Christ. It would be unloving for us to remain silent about what God's Word says in relation to human sin, including all forms of sexual sin. We therefore, must proclaim the truth that homosexuality is a sin, but that God loves sinners and Jesus can forgive all our sins. Newquay Baptist Church is made up of sinners who have been forgiven by a wonderful Saviour; since this is the case, we would invite all people, including the LGBT community, to come to our services. Our desire is that all would come to know and love Jesus.'

Mike Davidson (Core Issues Trust)

Christian ministry Core Issues Trust (CIT) was notified by its bank that its accounts would be closed following a coordinated harassment campaign. CIT is a non-profit Christian ministry that supports men and women who voluntarily seek change in sexual preference and expression.

On Friday 3 July Tweets appeared pressuring Barclays Bank to stop providing CIT with services. On Monday 20 July Barclays appears to have agreed to this request by informing both CIT and IFTCC that their accounts will be closing in two months, mid-September. The International Federation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice, a project supported by CIT has also received a closure notice. Barclays Bank, one of Stonewall's top-ranking employers, has provided no explanation for the decision. Since 28 June 2020, CIT has faced a co-ordinated, aggressive campaign from activists who pejoratively label their work as 'conversion therapy'. CIT offers talking therapy to people who want to explore moving away from unwanted same-sex attraction and gender confusions. More specifically the organisation offers 'SAFE-T' (Sexual Attraction Fluidity Exploration in Therapy).

Mike Davidson, CEO of CIT has said of the phrase 'conversion therapy', *'This is a pejorative, imposed term, coined by an American gay activist, Dr Douglas Haldeman in 1991, that names some extremes such as electro-shock and aversion techniques only ever conducted by medics, long since abandoned from the 60s, or extreme behaviours already outlawed such as 'corrective' rape for which there are no prosecutions in the UK. Because the term speaks of talking therapies and counselling as 'pseudo-science' in association with these extremes, to be heard defending talking therapy and counselling for unwanted same-sex attractions is then taken to be a defence of the indefensible 'Conversion Therapy' label. We reject this accusatory term.'*

The UK government has promised to end 'conversion therapy' and CIT has become a target for campaigners. These campaigners wish to outlaw conversations aimed at helping people who wish to move away from same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria. CIT has received well over 300 nuisance phone calls and numerous hateful messages. Its email address has, without consent, been signed up to porn sites such as PornHub, UK Lads, Lesbian Videos and a range of fetish sites. On social media there has been a campaign of aggressive trolling of Mike Davidson, Trustee Matthew Grech and staff worker Kylie Delia, extending also to their personal accounts. One text message hoped that staff family members are raped and killed. A text message with a satanic image was sent to the CIT mobile phone. Multiple complaints to social media sites were made about CIT. Videos and live broadcasts, previously reviewed and agreed as valid adverts with the platform were taken down by Facebook as was the CIT banner on more than one occasion. CIT Instagram content was also removed, despite being acceptable for more than two years. CIT staff were blocked from posting on Facebook and were unable to block trolls.

Mike Davidson, CEO of CIT said, *'A coordinated campaign has resulted in our ministry coming under immense pressure and key service providers cancelling their services, action which we consider to be discriminatory. The term 'conversion therapy' is being used as a catch-all phrase designed to discredit any help that people may provide to those with mixed sexual attractions who prefer their heterosexual side. This could include a listening ear, formal counselling or spiritual support. This amounts to mob rule. If a social media mob can cause a bank to close the account of a Christian ministry, then there is nowhere for Biblically faithful Christian ministries to go. The UK is now becoming an intensely intolerant country. Key service providers have cancelled their services to a Christian charity because of a social media mob.'*

Lawyers acting for Mike Davidson have sent a pre-action letter (a letter that seeks to find a resolution to a dispute without the need for legal action) to Barclays Bank, suggesting the removal of Core Issues Trust's banking facilities was discriminatory. Barclays has responded by saying that they reserve the right to close any account but have not set out their reasons for doing so in this instance. Core Issues Trust will now file a claim against Barclays Bank for discrimination.

Contributors to this issue of *The Bulletin*

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