



“The Air We Breathe”

by Glen Scrivener 2022
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The Australian Glen Scrivener opens; “Goldfish don’t see water. Goldfish see what’s in the water, they see what’s refracted through the water, but I assume (yes, assume – I haven’t done the proper investigations) that goldfish don’t see the water itself. And yet there it is. It’s their environment. Universal but invisible. It shapes everything they do and everything they see. But they don’t see *it*” (p.11).

His argument is simple – the same stands for us. As Westerners, we take many of the founding principles of our society for granted. We live in a *peculiar* culture – utterly different to the classical world of ancient times, different to undemocratic nations, different to theocracies as well. Why? Because our cultural norms are founded on distinctly Christian values.

Scrivener articulates this: “Here’s the contention of this book: if you’re a Westerner – whether you’ve stepped foot inside a church or not, whether you’ve clapped eyes on a Bible or not, whether you consider yourself an atheist, pagan or Jedi Knight – you are a goldfish, and Christianity is the water in which you swim” (p.11).

He continues: “Goldfish might not know the chemical composition of H₂O, but it’s still central to their lives. In the same way, I’m guessing that the concerns of the following chapters resonate with you: equality, compassion, consent, enlightenment, science, freedom, and progress. None of these are self-evident, nor are they widespread among the civilisations of the world. So where did they come from, and how did they get to become “the air we breathe?”” (p.13).

“We can answer that question in one word, in two sentences, or in ten chapters. The one-word answer is: Christianity. The two-sentence answer goes something like this: The extraordinary impact of Christianity is seen in the fact that you don’t notice it. You already hold particularly “Christian-ish” views, and the fact that you think of these values as neutral, obvious, or universal shows profoundly the Christian revolution has shaped you” (p.13).

Indeed, these values have been transposed into an acronym by another academic, Joseph Henrich. He says the Western world is distinctly WEIRD in our cultural values;

- **Western**; in contra-distinction to Eastern cultures, but also to Classical or Ancient cultures
- **Educated**; we believe in education for all, as a right, not as a luxury for the rich
- **Industrialised**; we have strong institutions and a long history of powerful industry
- **Rich**; our social fabric and stable governance has helped the accumulation of wealth
- **Democratic**; unlike theocracies, autocracies, or oligarchies, we hold onto democratic principles

Scrivener reminds us of the peculiarity of our modern assumptions. He says: “Our distinctive outlook in the West is a minority report on world history. It has emerged in cultures that are Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic...[it is] Christianity that has made the difference. Unmistakably the WEIRD West has its roots in the Jesus revolution.” (p.20-21).

How can we recognise such values?

Scrivener is quick to provide ample examples to prop up his argument. When we look around at our supposedly liberal, progressive, non-theistic political and cultural agendas, we quickly find that many of these values are grounded in profoundly Christian roots (p.196-7 and p.16).

- “Consider **equality**: once, steep moral hierarchies were the norm; now we want to root out inequalities wherever we find them. We believe in the equal moral status of every member of the human family, no matter their rank, race, religion, gender, or sexuality.
- Consider **compassion**: once, pity for the undeserving was considered a weakness; now we consider it a virtue. We believe a society should be judged by the way it treats its weakest members.
- Consider **consent**: once, powerful men could possess the bodies of whomever they pleased; now we name this as the abuse that it is. We believe that the powerful have no right to force themselves on others.
- Consent **enlightenment**: once, education was a luxury for rich men; now we consider it a necessity for all. We believe in education for all and its power to transform a society.
- Consider **science**: once, knowledge of the natural world was based on the assertions of authorities; now we hold the powerful to account and we seek to test such claims against objective standards. We believe in science – its ability to help us understand the world & improve our lives.
- Consider **freedom**: once, it was assumed that certain classes of people could be enslaved; now we consider that idea a kind of “blasphemy”. We believe that persons are not property and that each of us should be in control of our own lives.
- Consider **progress**: once, history was thought of as a descent from a golden age; now we feel that the arc of history bends, or should bend, towards justice. We believe in moral improvement over time and that we should continue to reform society of its former evils.”

What does this mean for our current cultural landscape?

On the one hand, we see a dangerous resurgence of some of the stoic, and classical hierarchical features, of the ancient world. This hierarchy was rigid and unforgiving. “Ancient philosophers did not think of themselves as defenders or even teachers of such inequality. “Nature herself” taught that some were fitter, stronger, smarter, and, frankly, better than others. There were superior races (Greeks over barbarians), superior sexes (men over women), and superior classes (free men over slaves). The deformity and inferiority of barbarians, women, and slaves was clear from their very nature. How could anyone deny that some people can govern well, while others need governing?” (p.31).

On the other hand, there is also a dangerous undercurrent of radical atomism and individualism, bent on splitting hairs and committed to what sociologists calls “competitive victimhood” (p.193). The comparison is stark, and well painted by Scrivener, “In Christianity the principle is that all sit equally at the same table. The modern goal is for all to climb equally high up their own ladders. Where the Bible says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), 21st-century Westerners now finish that sentence, “...for you are all individuals”. Or, worse, “...for you are all interchangeable”. At that point, the distance travelled from the Scriptural truth is immense. When *compassion* is divorced from the Christian story, it risks generating “competitive victimhood”. This is the name sociologists have given for the way victim status can be quickly claimed to gain an advantage. In Christianity, the Victim, Jesus, suffered redemptively and offers dignity and hope to the oppressed. The danger nowadays is that our chief desire is not to honour and help victims but to become them. Where virtue was once the cultivation of a great heart, nowadays we seek to demonstrate a thin skin.”

Interestingly, at this point in the book, Scrivener doesn’t underline the central role of redemption in the Christian story. Though he points to the heart of the gospel through the person of Jesus, Scrivener does not unpack the story of the cross and the transformation of death into resurrection. These are all major themes of Western culture – both in how suffering and sacrifice have been considered historically – but also in the portrayal of the redemptive hero that lies at the heart of so many Western stories, books, and films.

Nonetheless, the call for the church – that emanates from this context – is clear and resounding in the book.

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Scrivener is adamant that the history and story of Israel, as a minnow, should continue to inform us today. In comparison to Israel, “other armies would boast in their battles; Israel was a minnow whose greatest victories were won with slingshots, trumpets, and tent pegs (1 Samuel 17; Judges 7; Judges 4). Other kingdoms would sing of their greatness; Israel’s songs were full of their faults. To seek glory and greatness was, for many in the ancient world, the very meaning of their existence. In contrast the Jews were told by their God, “Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not” (Jeremiah 45:5, ESV). Among the jostling empires of the world, Israel was, on every level, an enigma” (p.68).

Those of us at TechHuman would jump to connect this point with debates circling around technology – what is the role of technology in modern society? Does our device paradigm reduce our manifold engagement with our neighbour (or increase it)? How do the people of God – as the minnow in the face of the digital empires of technology, AI, and Big Data – respond to the jostling empires of the 21st Century? These themes fall beyond the bounds of Scrivener’s book, though they are all themes that interest us. We hope to pick these up in subsequent seminars and discussions on the TechHuman platform.

The book concludes with a disconcerting assessment of the “moral settlement” (p.183) we have come to. We are now a mixture of half-truths and half-lies, with reduced compassion from the original Christian ethic, and no sense of the importance of forgiveness.

Scrivener writes: “This is the kind of moral settlement we have come to: a mixture of secularised Christianity and a post-war anti-fascism (which is itself the result of Christian sensibilities). Compassion and equality reign supreme as ideals (often under the titles “diversity” and “inclusion”). These beliefs are precious in themselves, yet they are no longer grounded in the Christian story that first gave them meaning. In short, a purely secular response to the 20th century has managed to flee from a great pit and yet has lost its way in the process. It inverts Naziism, but it does not thereby restore the original vision. It pursues abstract values (like “humanity”, “rights”, “freedom”, “progress”), but divorced from their source these values prove disconnected, and so do we” (p.183).

Reconnecting to the source, finding the story (and not just the morals) is what Scrivener says is the redemption hope of our culture. If we continue to simply moralise (painfully so), wag the finger, and forget the power of forgiveness, we’ll continue to drift from the story of truth that has founded our very civilisation. This divorce will vacate the power from our culture – leaving us either in a cultural vacuum or an egg-shell laden culture of criticism – which sounds a lot more like hostility than hospitality. If, on the other hand, we use our freedoms to serve, to live under grace (and not under the law), then there is the hope for us to escape the suffocation and re-connect with the freedom of the good news which first informed and transformed our culture.

Samuel Johns, Summer 2023