GOSPEL
SOCIETY
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Tide of Faith or Spiritual Tsunami - a return to Christianity or the explosion of Pagan Spirituality?

RESOURCE PAPER 22 - 2025

Much has been made in the post-COVID years of the returning to the shore of the tide of faith. The term "tide of faith" and the concept of a returning wave once long gone, is derived from Dover Beach a poem by Matthew Arnold. We will dive deeper into the poem later in this paper, but suffice for now is the concept among Christian apologists and church leaders in the West, that the demise of a Christian West may have been overstated.

Anecdotally, there is a return to church – or a first time attendance – among a younger crowd, and particularly of young men. There's a cultural shift too at the elite level, a reinterest in Christianity. For many online theological thinkers and Christian leaders there is the sense that the tide of faith is coming back in. This could be a significant time of revival and renewal for the church of God.

However the question has to be asked, is the future of the West, the immediate future at least, an orderly return of the tide of faith, or is it more like a spiritual tsunami that is barrelling down onto the shore once stripped bare by secularism? In the post-Christian West, atheism has not superseded Christianity, but rather all forms of spiritual searches have.

Tsunamis are different to tides. Tsunamis carry all sorts of dangerous flotsam and jetsam that buffet and disturb. In a post-Christian setting, without the guardrails of the faith to guide and direct, many people are searching for something "more", something "transcendent", and are looking for it in places that are not only strange to Christianity, but that are often hostile to it.

An orderly tidal return of orthodoxy may not be the future, but rather a rough and tumble spiritual grab-bag of all sorts, that we as orthodox Christians will have to navigate, and disciple people through. It appears we are seeing a form of Christian revival across the West, but it won't be the exclusive way in which people return to some form of spirituality. This paper will explore the "tide or tsunami" issue, but first here are some stories, beginning with "tide of faith" stories:

Sarah's Story

By her own admission Sarah Irving Stonebraker was looking for something more - something "transcendent" as she put it. By all accounts her life up to that point had been going exceptionally well. A young up-and-coming academic in the field of history, now undertaking postgraduate studies at Oxford University, and a family background that included academic rigour and plenty of table talk over dinner about issues that matter.

But as she sat in her college library at one of the world's great places of learning, she knew something was missing. Here's how Sarah puts it in her book **Priests of History: Stewarding the Past in an Ahistoric Age:**

I *had few external points of reference as I went about pursuing my desires and aspirations. I had no larger narrative that might give me a normative vision of human flourishing, a transcendent grounding for morality, or even a means of addressing life's ultimate concerns. Indeed as an atheist, I believed that there was no such thing as ultimate meaning and nothing was transcendent. I was proudly authentic, but ultimately rootless.*[1]

Note her use of the word "transcendent" twice in one introductory paragraph. As you read her book you realise that this journey takes her to somewhere, to someone.

John's Story

John Harris writes for The Guardian, the left-leaning, progressive UK newspaper. He is in many ways the typical post-religious person. His work exhibits that secular (over) confidence that religions can be understood better from the outside than from the inside. He writes with the common, and casual, assumptions of the secular left when it comes to matters of meaning and purpose in life.

And yet, in 2024, while writing about the revival in the career of Australian musician, Nick Cave, Harris begins to lament the loss of any over-arching belief system outside the stubborn atheism in which he was marinaded.

In an article entitled, **I'm a devout agnostic. But like Nick Cave, I hunger for meaning in our chaotic world**, Harris observes that, despite the collapse in church attendance in the West, the new atheists of his young adulthood, who once seemed so confident about the world, now belong in the past. He laments the muscular Christianity of those who he says have a "loathing of Islam" (it wouldn't be The Guardian if it didn't defend Islam), yet he is intrigued by:

…other people's quiet quests for meaning and transcendence, and the enduring presence in our culture of essentially Christian thinking. The historian Tom Holland – who, like Cave, has returned to the Christianity he was brought up with – says that in the way millions of us interpret world events there is something unspoken: the fact that "at the heart of western culture is the image of someone being tortured to death by the greatest empire on the face of the Earth".[2]

There it is again, that word "transcendence". Harris concludes with a thought experiment in which the hunger for meaning in our culture sees:

…increasing numbers of people being pulled away from their screens, towards something much more human and nourishing. Those pews, in other words, may not stay vacant forever.[3]

Harris, secular and progressive though he is, sees a future in which the church once again answers the meaning and purpose question.

Latin Mass Story

I was speaking at a conference in 2024, and mentioned an article on the ABC Triple J Hack site about the rise in popularity in Melbourne (our most secular city) to the Tridentine Latin Mass among young Catholics.

Hack is ostensibly for younger people, and the article was expressing surprise at the draw among young people to a particular parish in which the Latin Mass was used almost exclusively. So popular has this movement been in fact, that many were coming great distances to attend.

When I had finished my talk about this phenomenon, one young man walked up to me and said "That's the parish I go to". When I asked why, he repeated many of the reasons that were outlined on the ABC Hack site; the loss of meaning and purpose in the world, the need for something beautiful in an ugly world, the sense that the church expression he attended offers something from "above".

As another young person states in the article:

It's divine and so uncompromising – you're witnessing something that's beyond your own feeble existence,[4]

What was clear to both the young person I spoke to, and in the article, was that the current Pope's attempt to modernise the church, and his apparent move to ground it in the secular quests of life, is being rejected by a particular cohort.

For them, the Pope's attempt was actually part of the problem not part of the solution to church decline. Something weirder and slightly intangible was required rather than something contained within the immanent frame.

However, it's not all a deep longing for Jesus or orthodoxy. The search for something more in the modern culture has long, and inquisitive, tendrils. Or as said at the start, it feels more like a tsunami replete with flotsam and jetsam. Let's move away from the orderly tide of faith to some of the more disorderly spiritual tsunami stories.

Strangers On the Bus Story

A minister friend reported to me his eavesdropping experience on a Sydney bus recently - two ostensibly modern young men talking about the price of housing, and their share options, on the way to work.

But then it got interesting. As my friend listened in, the conversation jumped to the tarot reading at the local psychic that one of the young men was planning to attend that weekend. Both men moved easily between the secular frame, with its figures and numbers and spreadsheets, to the world of spirituality, without any apparent

psychological disconnect. Think about that. Think about how those two worlds – the hyper-modern post-industrial information age meets with the pagan ancient world of tarot readings.

Health Professionals Story

I spoke at a regional church in 2024 in a town with a large hospital where many city-educated allied health professionals work. After a talk I gave on spirituality in the modern world, two young women came up to me.

"You are exactly right about young people today," they told me, "All of our work colleagues spend lunch time talking about their stars, the tarot readings and the psychic parties they attend."

Now this was not among the urban-fringe underclass, much less a progressive coastal country town in which pagan spirituality had taken root. This was a conservative town. There among standard, well-heeled, modern young people who had a high level of education and who had grown up on a diet of secularism, a materialist world view, and no church background, there was a hunger for something more.

And it was not being filled with a return to church, but a vigorous interest in the unseen spiritual realm that was antithetical to the gospel. A return, in fact, to the pagan superstition that the gospel encountered in cities across the Empire as we read of in Acts (c.f Acts 19).

1. What Is Going On?

It is clear we are in a moment of flux. There is a definite pattern, a shift towards re-engagement with ideas around spirituality and the re-engagement of words such as "transcendence".

Much of the spiritual hunger in our time is a rejection of the immanent frame – the conviction, stated publicly at least, that even if there is anything beyond the material world, it is insignificant in terms of day-to day-life. Spiritual ideas are opinion not fact, unfit for consideration in the real world of the public square, and the decisions that need to be made in political and cultural spheres. The invisible world does not intersect in any meaningful with reality.

Let's take the word "transcendence" as a hold-all for this renewed spiritual interest in the West – whether that be interest in the tide of faith or the spiritual tsunami. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary describes transcendence thus:

the ability to go beyond the usual limits; existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level.[5]

The Latin root meaning contains the prefix "trans" (beyond), and the verb "scandere" (to climb), which is a great visual. "To climb beyond" wraps up the usages in the conversations and examples above.

In common usage the word describes something outside or beyond the physical. It contains the concept of something above us, that while invisible is accessible within certain conditions.

Yet the way the term is used today is not limited to accessing the "divine" or the "invisible".

The likes of Irving-Stonebraker and Harris use the term not simply to speak of an invisible realm (**Does something more exist than what we can see?**), but of an existential desire (**Is there meaning and purpose available to us beyond what is offered by the material world?**).

It is this latter meaning that is primarily driving the modern spiritual search and it does so after a period in the West when such an idea was thought to have finally been relegated to the realm of personal opinion rather than public fact. The sheer failure of the modern world to offer lasting meaning and purpose has resulted in a sense of spiritual hunger.

While this paper does not have the time to go into the long march of rationalist, materialist and

enlightenment thinking across the West over the past two centuries, it is worth exploring the recent populist rejection of the idea of anything being "transcendent" per se - in particular by those who view the idea with hostile intent, and who would align it with unhealthy superstitions and unverifiable religious claims.

The Waxing of New Atheism

As noted above, and commented upon by many observers, the tone of the conversation has changed in Western culture – and quickly so. The reflexive scorn towards religious conviction is being replaced with a curiosity, or at least a begrudging admission, that the Christian spiritual framework of the West has shaped the culture in positive ways.

We have moved a long way from books such as God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything[6], by the late Christopher Hitchens, or The God Delusion[7] by Richard Dawkins.

Yet it was only at the turn of the millennium that such books, and authors, were in the ascendency. Podcasts, speaking tours, debates with Christian apologists; these were standard fare. Hitchens and Dawkins along with the late Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris were referred to as "The Four Horsemen of the Atheist Apocalypse". Their outright rejection of spirituality, their commitment to materialism and their view that spiritual searches were not simply wrong, but dangerous, placed new atheism in ascendency among modern thinkers.

It was somehow "cool" to be a hard atheist who gave no quarter to what was considered superstitious and unhelpful medieval thinking. It was common for such men, and those who followed them, to refuse a priori to take anyone seriously at an intellectual level if they held to a view of reality beyond the materialist world. The spiritual realm, the possibility of the transcendent, was ruled out – for a time.

The Waning of The New Atheism

Because something has happened the landscape has changed drastically in recent years. It is noteworthy how many public intellectuals have reconsidered their previous materialist-only stance, or in the famous case of Dawkins' friend and fellow atheistic intellectual, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, rejected a purely materialist view of the world altogether as inadequate to answer life's questions.[8] More on Hirsi Ali later.

None of this is not to say that our churches are no longer in decline and are now thriving, or that in the public square the reality of God is taken into consideration when it comes to government

policy and so forth. There is still much hostility around matters such as faith-based schools and taxpayers' monies being given to religious organisations. For example, legislation before many Australian parliaments seeks to hamper and prosecute biblical understandings of what it means to be human. Whatever the return of spiritual conversation to the public discourse means, it does not imply orthodox Christianity is back in favour. It does not imply that the hegemony of cultural Christianity – whether devoutly adhered to or not personally – is on the way back. In fact, the new spiritual tsunami often gets a warmer welcome than the returning faith tide.

However, with Harris's latest book entitled, Waking Up: Searching For Spirituality Without Religion[9], and with Dawkins admitting he is a cultural Christian, along with the likes of Hirsi Ali and her husband, the author and historian, Niall Ferguson (who now admits to going to church), plus the popularity of historian Tom Holland, and famed psychologist Jordan Peterson, there's a growing sense that a commitment to the idea of unseen realities is no longer regarded as the death knell of intellectual credibility.

The Intertidal Zone

Where does this leave us in 2025? We are in the intertidal zone. We sense that there is change afoot, that a return to "something" may be occurring, but that moment of shift is either imperceptible or frustratingly unclear.

The intertidal zone is the area of shore between the lowest and highest tides. How far will the tide go out? How far will it come in? When will it come back in? What will it look like when it does? These are questions that have multi-headed answers.

Matthew Arnold's famous 19th century poem Dover Beach is an oft-cited example of how the Christian faith of many centuries in the West retreated in the face of modernity:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.[10]

What is often overlooked in the poem is the lament it contains that all that is left to the poet, and his presumed lover, is themselves. The universe is otherwise cold and impersonal.

It is a perfect "You Do You" moment as, with the retreat of this sea, there is nothing above us or beyond us, nothing to climb towards, to guide us or give us ultimate meaning. It's something of an irony that while Arnold called the retreat of faith a "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar", the response of many in the West has been to rejoice in that withdrawal.

The confidence that the immanent frame can fully, irrevocably and universally replace this sea of faith is thoroughly modern and Western. It has held sway in our popular imagination. It infuses much modern literature and art.

The Christian ocean has surged out for so long and is so far out towards the horizon, the assumption is that we can do without it. Yet how does Arnold frame his conclusion?

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

In other words, without faith, all of the possibilities are a chimera. Meaning and purpose in life have – by necessity – become merely personal quests. They cannot be universalised. The "various, beautiful and new" are ungrounded in any reality beyond the self.

Yet, it is fair to say that this quest for the self - the authenticity search – is proving less straightforward than many may have imagined at its outset. The levels of both social and personal anxiety in our culture, the deficit of meaning and purpose beyond what one can derive for oneself has not brought about the utopian freedoms once promised to us, when the religious dogma and oppressive superstition was finally removed from the culture.

The advertising campaign on buses from 2009 that Richard Dawkins and TV comedy writer Ariene Sherine spearheaded highlighted the supposed emotional and existential benefits of atheism/agnosticism. It read: *"There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life".* [11] While the intent of the campaign was linked with the right to free speech in the UK, the premise that it is questions about God that have people worried in life, seems woefully naïve in 2025. A vast literature has formed in the ensuring decade and a half since 2009, highlighting the upsurge in anxiety, especially among younger generations. [12]

The primary worries are not particularly about God's existence, but rather about rapid discontinuous change; climate change; the rise of technology and where it will take us in terms of ethics, employment and even existence; increasing political and cultural polarisation; the housing crisis; the demographic crisis. All these things are confronting the West at a

time in which we have less relational capital and social cohesion to lean upon. People are looking for something more and something secure. But are they turning to the God of the Bible?

The Faith Tide

Some believe so. In his book and podcast of the same name: The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God, UK Christian broadcaster and author, Justin Brierley, posits that the tide of faith is coming back in, in the West. He interviews and writes about those who are either returning to the Christian faith of their past or are at least exploring spiritual matters. According to Brierley:

Perhaps we are not seeing the emptying of churches to make way for a secular future but an emptying out that will make way for a new influx of people. Perhaps the tide of Matthew Arnold's 'Sea of Faith' is approaching its furthest limit and is ready, at last, to come rushing back in.[13]

In response to a critique challenging his assumption, Brierley has stated that this shift is not merely anecdotal and that statistics point to a reinvigoration, especially among younger generations:

Three-quarters of non-Christian students say that, if asked, they would accept an invitation to church. That's according to Fusion, a Christian student organisation that surveyed thousands of students across UK campuses. Roscoe Crawley helped to compile the research. He says that Fusion's staff teams have been encountering 'unprecedented' numbers of students coming to faith and beginning to attend church in the past two years.[14]

This confirms what campus ministry teams have been saying about the situation here in Australian universities also. Anecdotally pastors around Australia confirm an increased interest in church and the gospel among young men from outside the university setting - working class young men are interested in "something more".

Yet within the same article Brierley makes a comment that alerts us to the fact that the return of the tide may be messier than we realise. He says:

Perhaps most surprising of all is the fact that Gen Z (born 1997-2012), the generation least likely to be found in church, are nevertheless the most receptive to spirituality. They have been dubbed 'the open generation'. You only have to look on TikTok to see how this openness is often expressed. From 'Manifesting' to 'WitchTok', there are all kinds of esoteric supernatural beliefs being practised.[15]

The Spiritual Tsunami

"Receptive to spirituality". There is an irenic ring to that term. However, the question must be asked; What will such a receptiveness look like? There are other more cautious, indeed concerned, voices about what the returning waters will entail in the coming years.

For while there will certainly be gospel opportunities, the seismic shifts in Western culture in the past decades, coupled with advances in technology, a reorienting of identity in areas of gender and sexuality, a post-Christian naivety about dabbling in spiritual matters without safety-rails, and a church often not equipped to deal with the spiritual upheaval that is coming its way, means this may be more of a tsunami than a tide. The desire for the transcendent does not always lead to the cross.

Tsunamis are dangerous not simply because of the mass of water they carry, but because of the assorted flotsam and jetsam that they sweep up along the way. Tides are orderly and metered, but tsunamis are altogether different. Hence what the West is facing in light of the subterranean shifts in thinking, the upheavals of politics, culture, identity markers, hyper-nationalism, mass movements of people, technological overload and so in, is just as much "tsunami" as it is "tide".

So while "WitchTok" seems innocuous on the surface, this self-framed spirituality search is, by many accounts, leading people into dark places. The naivety that spiritual searches are one-way-streets, in that you get to control the forces rather than they control you, is the product of religious amnesia in the West.

This was highlighted by the warning of New York Times columnist, Ross Douthat:

…from any religious perspective, there's reason to worry about a society in which structures have broken down and masses of people are going searching without maps or playing around in half-belief or deploying, against what remains of Christianity, symbols that invoke multiple spiritualities at once. Some element of danger is unavoidable. The future of humanity depends on people opening doors to the transcendent, rather than sealing themselves into materialism and despair. But when the door is open, be very, very careful about what you invite in.[16]

As a conservative Roman Catholic, Douthat notes the recent uptick in requests for exorcisms in – of all places – New York City, and the lack of a framework among modern psychiatric models to deal with what they could not explain.[17] The modern world is looking distinctly medieval.

This is reiterated in Rod Dreher's most recent book, **Living in Wonder: Finding Mystery and Meaning in a Secular Age.** Dreher, of Eastern Orthodox faith, calls for a return to the transcendent framework in the West as the solution to what ails us. Granted, his work has concepts within it that we as lower case "o" orthodox Christians may be uncomfortable with, but he offers a direct challenge to the implicit non-transcendence on offer in so many Protestant churches (albeit as we will see below, the practice of biblical ideas of transcendence also transcends what Dreher is speaking about from his Orthodox framework).

In a recent interview on the Dual Citizens podcast, Dreher suggested that the "woke" framework of our modern, progressive world is being replaced by a resurgence of the occult. There is a worrying lack of discernment when it comes to these matters:

Just because it's something real that you have experienced, something real and spiritual, does not mean at all that it is of God. You need discernment, and you only get that discernment from Scripture and from authoritative Christian traditions.[18]

In his interview and, indeed, in his book, Dreher recounts some quite frankly horrifying encounters with spiritual beings as people in the West commence a spiritual quest with next to no understanding of evil and sin and malevolence. Simply put, they have no maps.

Yet with a mistrust of authority running deeply within the younger generation, a generation taught to celebrate expressive individualism, and one that has access to all and every spiritual belief among them due to modern technology, we should expect the church to come face to face with a dangerous level of flotsam and jetsam among spiritual seekers.

Rod Dreher

Author and Roman Catholic convert, Tara Isabella Burton, says that the church, while offering spiritual food to the malnourished, will find itself competing with a particular form of DIY religion that cobbles together often contradictory beliefs.

Burton calls this up-and-coming cohort "The Remixed". And while they want the basic frameworks that traditional religion gave - meaning, purpose, community and rituals, they are crafting their own versions. She states:

Today's Remixed reject authority, institution, creed and moral universalism. They value intuition, personal feeling, and experiences. They demand to rewrite their own scripts about how the universe, and human beings, operate. Shaped by the twin forces of a creative-communicative Internet and consumer capitalism, today's Remixed don't want to receive doctrine, to assent automatically to a creed.

Tara Isabella Burton

They want to choose - and more often than not, purchase – the spiritual path that feels more meaningful to them. They prioritise intuitional spirituality over institutional religion. And they want, when available institutional options fail to suit their needs, the freedom to mix and match, to create their own daily rituals and practices and belief systems.[19]

This sounds to the ear attuned to spiritual forces in the world, both good and bad, incredibly optimistic and dangerously naïve at one and the same time. It certainly raises the spectre of a spiritual tsunami rather than a faith tide. And even if Westerners are simply paddling at the edges of the renewed interest in spiritual matters, they are aligning themselves with unhelpful superstitions. Witness for example, the return of star-signs on the morning and nightly news programs in the mainstream media.[20]

It poses questions of how orthodox Christianity can – and will have to – undo some of the damage being wrought upon such people who chase after either dark spiritualities or silly superstitions. While there may be an openness to spirituality, we can expect there to be hostile pushback to the gospel, because of the influence of invisible spiritual powers that are opposed to God.

In Acts 14, the gospel power display of Paul and Barnabas was not met with faith, but with pagan superstition and an all-too-soon rejection of the message about Jesus.[21] Signs and wonders were not enough to elicit faith. So what does this spiritual tsunami ask of us, if the search for transcendence does not merely lead to a return to church, but also to a return to paganism and superstition in the West where truly dark spiritual forces are being unleashed? How is the church to deal with this new scenario?

Further, if people expect the spiritual world to have a transcendent framework to it - in which the spiritual world and its manifestations are obviously real - do our traditions acknowledge such manifestations, know how to deal with them, or what to offer in place of them? What does an orthodoxy look like that takes the transcendent/invisible realities seriously?

2. How Are We to Respond?

The Biblical Reality

The Bible assumes reality assumes both the material and the immaterial realities. The visible and the invisible. The created and the uncreated, or more to the point, the creature and the Creator. Faith as an entity itself acknowledges this:

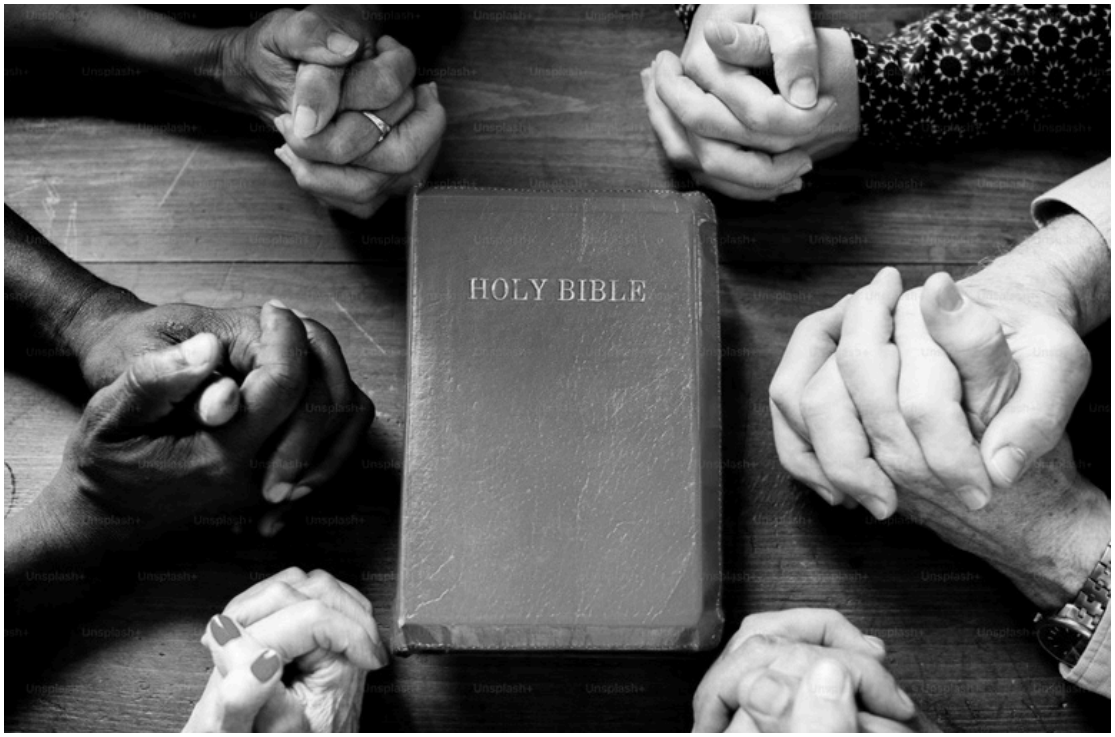
And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb 11:6)

To believe that God exists immediately puts us into the realm of the non-material, the spiritual, the transcendent. The Bible does not blush when it comes face to face with the fact more reality exists than what we can see. Indeed from the outset, the narrative presumes a multi-tiered reality:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. (Gen 1:1-2).

This is reiterated in the New Testament at the start of John's Gospel which makes a distinction between the things that are made and the Maker of those things (John 1:1-3).

A critical book that explores this invisible reality is Michael Heiser's The Unseen Realm[22], which explores the so-called supernatural world as laid out in the pages of the Bible. While taking some paths that perhaps we would not necessarily take, Heiser's book is a wake-up call for orthodox Christians who may feel uncomfortable about such matters.



Heiser says that unless we read Scripture with the same commitment to the unseen world that its original readers had, we will miss much of what it is saying about the transcendent world. He notes that while this is less an issue for those within the charismatic and Pentecostal movements, evangelicals have been remiss. Heiser makes this telling claim:

There are two basic reasons why non-charismatics tend to close the door on the supernatural world. One is their suspicion that charismatic practices are detached from sound exegesis of Scripture…The other reason is less self-congratulatory. The believing church is bending under the weight of its own rationalism, a modern world that would be foreign to the biblical writers. Traditional Christian teaching has for centuries kept the unseen world at arm's length. We believe in the Godhead because there's not point to Christianity without it. The rest of the unseen world is handled with a whisper or a chuckle.[23]

Examining the Charges

These are strong claims, particularly the second. The implication is that we, as evangelicals, are committed to the Trinitarian view of an eternal God because we know that without such a view we are not Christian. But we have given little thought to the rest of the unseen world because it is too embarrassing for us. As those who wish to be taken seriously in the academic, political and corporate worlds, admitting belief in the unseen may be a career or reputation risk.

We have then shaped our evangelism, our pastoral care, our church practices away from the "weirdness" of the unseen realm for pragmatic reasons, although we will often term it differently, such as "removing all barriers to the gospel", "staying on mission", or "to gain a hearing among modern minds". In the end it can become what we don't say, as opposed to what we can say that will most shape us.

It is uncontested that we need sound exegesis of Scripture. A swathe of movements among less than discerning denominations has seen congregations barking like dogs, laughing hysterically with "holy laughter" and finding demonic influence in unfortunate people who are suffering mental disorders. But these errors do not negate the fact of the unseen, or the manner in which it intersects with us. In their apologetics book, **The World Next Door: A short guide to the Christian faith**[24], Peter Orr and Rory Shiner, use the Apostles' Creed, line by line, to commend the Christian faith to a modern audience. It's a deft book that intersects each statement within the creed with personal experience.

However that is not how the book starts. The first chapter is called "**But first, demons**" and it unpacks the story of Jesus delivering Legion and driving the demons/ghosts into the pigs who rush into the water and drown. The demons beg not to be sent to the abyss. The first ministry of Jesus that they emphasise in their book was that "He was also an exorcist".[25]

They do not dwell on the speculative nature of what is and what isn't demonic possession, but rather use the event to highlight what they call "the biblical triple-decker universe mud-map".[26] Three layers: heaven, earth and the place of the dead. Their contention is that without an a priori commitment to this perspective, what the Bible is about, why it matters, and why it matters to you, will not make sense. Orr and Shiner start there before going on to unpack the universally accepted standard of Christian orthodoxy, the Apostles' Creed.

It is this biblical commitment to the tripartite reality that anchors how the Bible unpacks the literal meaning of "transcendence", and which enables it to satisfy that secondary meaning – the search for something more in terms of meaning and purpose in life. The two are integrated.

How Should We Integrate?

While we should welcome this reinvigoration of the spiritual quest in the West, it must be said as orthodox believers committed to "the faith once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), that we must be discerning. That very verse is written into the context of wrong thinking that has led to wrong behaviour.

Whatever the nature of the water coming back in – tide or tsunami – we wish to clear it of the heretical or spiritually dark flotsam and jetsam. Not all forms of the Christian faith are as helpful, or as faithful as others. We also wish to ensure that the water is as clear as possible. Hence, while some aspects of Christianity's return ought to be celebrated, we must rightly divide the Word of Truth. We are not merely interested in pragmatics (what works), but also in principles (what is true). Just because something works does not mean it is true.

That is the point that Ross Douthat makes above when it comes to the more confronting dark spiritual forces we risk unleashing.

But what of a broadly Christian approach? Where should believers land? What form should the returning tide of faith take? Are there more, and therefore less helpful ways to reinvigorate a sense of the transcendent for our immanently framed world?

What follows are three expressions or experiences of the faith that while may be helpful, are in the end, deficient. I will conclude with a section on how I believe we can biblically bring the two senses of transcendence together in an orthodox way.

1.A Return to Traditionalism

There has been a reinterest in the “otherworldly” nature of ancient and traditional forms of worship. This has appealed to those who have long felt that the immanent frame is empty of meaning and purpose.

The sense of transcendence offered in ancient forms grounds followers in something beyond the materialist modern world and its failure to provide stable ground for forming identity and significance. This Easter 2025 for example we have seen more evidence that those searching for meaning have embraced Christian liturgical forms.[27]

This has not merely been in Roman Catholic or Anglo-Catholic settings. Even church plants that are ostensibly non-denominational have sought out creeds and corporate prayers from the Church Fathers to embed in their worship services.

The idea that primarily the “horizontal” matters in church (mutual encouragement in line with Ephesians 5:9), has historically driven how evangelical churches in the late West have formed their worship services. The church growth mindset was to not be seen as “too weird” to outsiders to gain a hearing. Yet the question must be asked: Has this been to the detriment of the “vertical”, the sense of awe and wonder and otherness of worship that is at time inexplicable, or at least hard to translate to the modern mind that will not admit to that triple-tiered universe that Orr and Shiner speak of?

Yet traditionalism itself cannot be enough. If we believe that structures and calendars and liturgies are good things, they are only good things in that they provide frameworks for a living and active faith. The risk is that outward forms will only lead to the problem they created in the first place- that of nominalism as opposed to conversion at a heart level.

2. Reinvigorated Pentecostalism

The Pentecostal and charismatic experiences of my own late teens were driven by a desire for the “something more” that transcendence would bring. This seems to be at play in the upsurge among young people turning to Pentecostal churches across the West (and indeed in places such as South America) over the past decade.

While much of this is in the more "Pentecostal-lite" frame, with less emphasis on tongues as a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence, and more emphasis on ecstatic, heart-felt worship in which songs express inner feelings and a desire for God to engage, there is still the sense that God may "show up" at church at any stage.

While it is easy to dismiss this as akin to the emotional manipulation of a rock concert, it is instructive that for many attendees at rock concerts, that same transcendent experience is being sought.

A recent trip I made with my family to the Sydney Opera House to hear the Australian Chamber Orchestra play out the story of God's salvation from the Garden of Eden, to the Garden of Gethsemane, to the Garden in the New Creation City, through the music of Bach and Arvo Part left us with the same transcendent experience. Once the lights came up, the applause had finished and we spilled out onto the noisy concourse. It was as if a spell had been broken. In the same way the modern Pentecostal churches self-consciously seek to create an atmosphere that draws the worshipper up into ecstatic experience. In a world of iPhones, online porn, 24 hour opening hours, and daily commutes, it is not hard to see why.

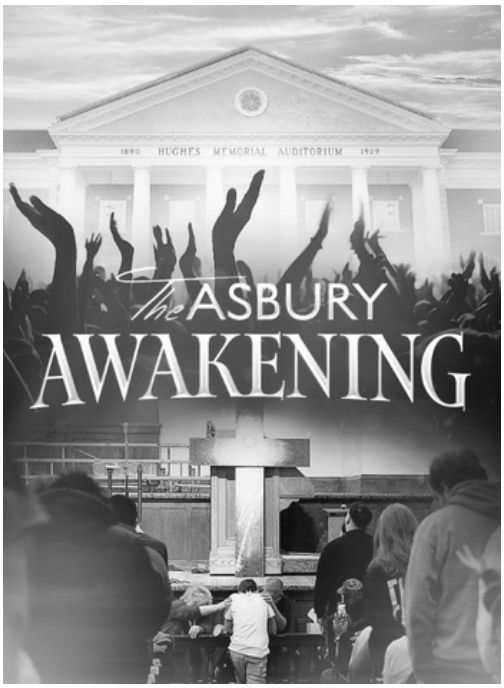
Yet there is an increasing, albeit anecdotal, phenomenon that I have researched, in which this expression of church has a limited shelf-life for many young people in particular. I believe that in time this will be evidenced by actual data. Without a sound framework of biblical teaching, doctrinal catechesis and discipline of the Word, such expressions of church can become emotivism only. Orthodox evangelical churches are finding that they are receiving an influx of young Pentecostal/charismatic believers who are looking for some theological frameworks and a depth of thinking and teaching they are unable to access from their own traditions.

These deficiencies can too easily result in a pietistic, self-focussed expression of the faith that requires the experience of the Sunday event to be "better than the last time". A lack of teaching, and an overcommit to emotional response will not set up people well for the world of Monday to Saturday.

3. Revival

In a fascinating article on The Gospel Coalition site that explained the appeal of the so-called Asbury Awakening at Asbury University in early 2023, a senior student at Wheaton College, JT Reeves, explains what led him to drive over to Asbury to experience it. He begins thus:

Imagine that, like me, you grew up in a hurricane blitz of secularism that systematically dismantled your belief in the unseen. Even if a miracle should

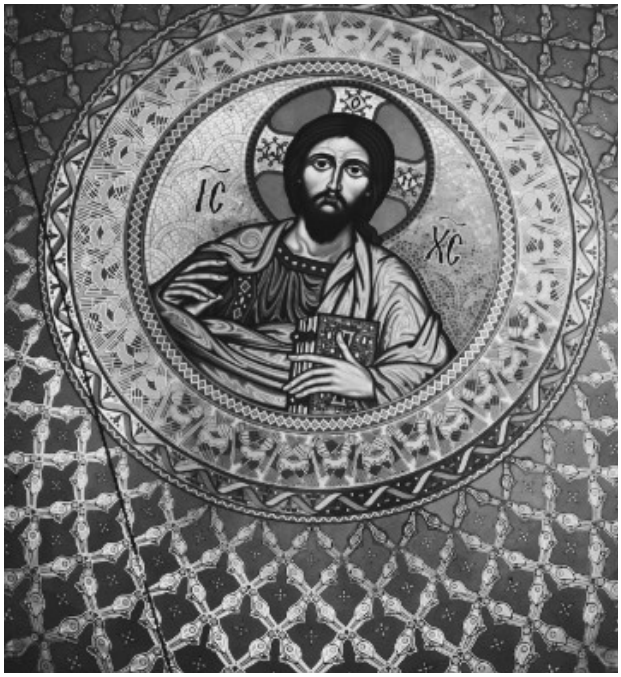


happen, you'd probably be too sensible (or cynical) to believe it. Before you hit puberty, rampant individualism forcefully placed you in a cage like a circus animal and handed you an iPhone so you could pretend you are not lonely. You use the phone. And sometimes it works.[28]

The rest of Reeves' explanation unpacks the modern malaise of a generation steeped in immanence and a materialist reality. He ends with these words:

Above the current of our screaming algorithms, the Jealous God was whispering, I will ask more of you than you ever dreamed of giving, and only then will I give you more than you ever dreamed of asking for. If you want to know what really changed in us, the answer is simple: God changed our whole imagination. And we live believing he'll do it again.[29]

This example is a clear echo of Sarah Irving-Stonebraker, and an answer to John Harris. It's the search for transcendence in its secondary meaning, and an admission that it can only be found in the discovery of the reality of its primary meaning.



Yet lest we dismiss this as a young person's anguish, listen to the words of Trevin Wax, a senior writer at The Gospel Coalition. His book **The Thrill of Orthodoxy: Rediscovering the Adventure of Christian Faith**[30] is a call to revel as God's people in deep biblical truths as they shape our lives. Wax reflects on the Asbury events some months later stating:

The burning question from Asbury isn't about Asbury; it's about you. It's about your heart. It's about your longing…Whatever happens or doesn't happen at the Asbury Awakening and beyond, may we be marked by a living thirst for a knowledge of the living God and an irrepressible desire to see him at work in power, doing whatever he and he alone can do—in us and through us. The thrill of orthodoxy results not in arms crossed but arms uplifted.[31]

Reeves and Wax are saying the same thing. Asbury was about the desire to experience God, not merely know about him, or assent to truths that pertain to him.

Yet once again there is a deficiency here. Revival has happened before in spectacular ways. But the fact that it formed does not mean that it should be normed. The Welsh revival at the start of the 20th century was indeed more spectacular and widespread than Asbury, yet Wales would not be a country some century later that we would name as strongly evangelical.

If revival, and its immediate transformations, is not grounded in a local expression of church that takes the raging torrent and provides it with riverbanks down which to flow, it will eventually become a swamp. Our quest, according to the

New Testament, is not to assume constant revival, or even to seek it/drum it up, but to preach the Word in season and out of season, and to grow the church by the ordinary means of grace.

4. The Thrill of Orthodoxy

Ordinary Means of Grace

The way forward is found in the title of Trevin Wax's book mentioned above. That orthodoxy (small "o") has a thrill to it, precisely because in the everyday world that we inhabit, the reality is that we are – as Orr and Shiner point out – living in the middle tier of that three-tiered system. And things may move between them.

While it may be that other church traditions lure us with their promises of the ecstatic, or their commitment to transcendent worship practices, or even their heightened language around what is occurring in the invisible realm at any given time, orthodox Christian faith rooted in sola scriptura offers transcendent realities, and calls for transcendent practices, in the realm of ordinary life.

We call them "the ordinary means of grace" for a reason. God has given the preaching of the Word, prayer, the breaking of bread and fellowship (Acts 2:42) as tangible expressions of God's work in the world. This is heaven – the top tier – breaking into the earth – the middle tier. These are not simply acts that we engage in performatively before each other. They have real spiritual consequences in the heavenlies and they transform us in the process.

To give up on these is a sign that we have lessened our commitment to transcendent realities. So, for example, to cease to pray in one's own life, or to relegate it to a minor mumble during any given Sunday service, is to admit, in the words of Paul E Miller:

[That] you are quietly confident that time, money, and talent are all you need in life. You'll always be a little too tired, a little too busy. But, if like Jesus you realize you can't do life on your own, then no matter how busy, no matter how tired you are, you will find the time to pray.[32]

Our prayerlessness is a sign that our reflexive belief is contained within the immanent frame. A reinvigorate prayer life is a commitment not only to a transcendent view of reality, but an admission that God can – and does – work in this middle tier called earth. And when our churches communally reflect our personal lack of prayer, then anyone new to the faith would be within their rights to assume we don't consider it important or effective.

Clearly this is true of how we should treat Scripture. Not only the reality of Scripture, but the content. And not only the content that speaks of obviously transcendent experiences. When we teach we must make much of such passages:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh[g] *and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus… (Ephesians 2:1-6)*

To unpack this reality for Christians, and their dual location (both the top tier and the middle tier) by dint of being united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, is to give practical application to what transcendence truly looks like, and what it truly achieves for us. The ordinary weekly preaching of the Word is critical to our spiritual lives.

This is particularly helpful for that growing cohort of ex-Pentecostals who have landed in many of our Bible teaching churches, looking for more than the ecstatic worship experience. Showing such people how rich and meaningful music worship is a reflection of our transcendent position, not a means to attain it, is often liberating.

However, the traffic is not only one-way. If people with such backgrounds come into our churches, what might they teach us about a more "vertical" reality to our worship that, liberated from any ideas of coercing God to "come down" prepares us to raise our arms, not simply fold them?

The ordinary means of grace also means "breaking bread" with other believers (not the Lord's Supper). We have to commit ourselves to spending time intentionally with other believers over food, and in that process assume that believers together can converse with each other – should converse with each other – about gospel matters. If Christians meet to eat together on a regular basis and they never open God's Word or pray for each other as they leave, then it is a tacit admission that only the visible world exists.

And of course, we should not leave out the Lord's Supper. Much ink – and not a little blood – has been spilled down the centuries discussing the nature of the Lord's Supper. But celebrating it on an increasingly regular basis seems to be a critical element for Christians going forward. When we have heard the gospel proclaimed we are then offered the chance to respond by feeding on Christ in our hearts by faith. We should not be embarrassed by the very ritualistic nature of this action, as it is not empty ritual, but deeply meaningful. It is a ritual established by Christ and inhabited by him.

There is a thrill to the ongoing life of orthodox Christianity that we must recapture and re-envision with the true sense of the transcendent. After all, as those who worship a God of order, those who have been buffeted by the disorderly flotsam and jetsam of the spiritual tsunami, will find a place of refuge to make sense both of the world and of their world.

Extraordinary Acts of Power?

A final thought, and one worth exploring further, is whether there may a return, or a first-time uptake of some of the more outwardly startling expressions of spiritual power in our evangelical churches in the modern West.

If, in the West, we are seeing a spiritual tsunami, a resurgence of paganism and dark spiritual practices and presences in the West, ought we not to both admit their origins and seek to stem their influences?

If both Rod Dreher and Ross Douthat are correct, that a younger generation in the West with no Christian background is naively being overtaken and enslaved by spiritual powers that in the past we have associated with tribes in sub-Saharan Africa, then we need to be prepared to face these spiritual powers head on.
A quote attributed to many, but made culturally famous by the 1995 movie The Usual Suspects goes thus:

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

It sounds right, but it's wrong. It may be the greatest trick the Devil has pulled so far in the West, but for much of the rest of the world, his

existence and the presence of other invisible malevolence, is taken for granted. His trick in those places is to convince people that he is all-powerful. And no Western missionary to places such as sub-Saharan Africa returns home denying either the reality of his existence, or the fear that he holds over people.

If the West is once again lapping up spiritually dark and dangerous practices that had first been tamed by Christianity, and then been gradually denied by post-Christian secularism, then we might expect to see some of what Dreher calls "woo-woo"; spiritual happenings from the lower tier that seek to assert unauthorised authority in the middle tier.

If a generation of young people are putting together a "remixed" version of spirituality, or are assuming that their spiritual searches leave them in control of the outcomes, or are dabbling in practices that offer a glimpse of transcendence without considering the consequences of opening that door, then are we ready to clean up that mess?

What might it mean for us as churches to have to deal with the flotsam and jetsam that the spiritual tsunami washes up on our shores in the coming decades, as the search for transcendence takes a dark turn?

What might it look like to enable the equivalent of Acts 19, in which those who practiced magic arts realise that Jesus is in fact all powerful, and they come and "burn their books" so speak, before us as churches?

What might it mean to re-establish as part of our core convictions that there is movement between the three tiers, and that part of the Christian task is to reassert the authority of Christ over the legions of spiritual dark forces innocuously imbibed by those with no language or category for what is afflicting them?

While we may not be able envisage what that might look like, it is worth being prepared spiritually for their eventuation. How might we do that? Trevin Wax's words from **The Gospel Coalition** says this:

Forget all the surface stuff we say about revival and our dependence on the Spirit. It's possible to say you want revival but deep down to not want the discomfort God's presence might bring. It's possible to sing songs every Sunday asking for renewal while nursing grudges and bitterness you don't want to be delivered from. It's possible to enjoy the division of the church, your theological tribalism, or the secret sins you harbor, or to take twisted comfort in your complacency—to become deadened to the church's decline and apathetic regarding the future. The Spirit of God is not safe.[33]

Yet as we conclude, let's never forget that the power of the gospel is not in the spectacular confronting of the devil in all manner of signs and wonders, but in the resisting of the devil (James 4). And how is the devil resisted in the context of the passage? Not through crucifixes and holy water, but through the ordinary life of the godly Christian community lived out in the light of the gospel: submitting to God's will, purity of hands, peace within relationships, humility in how we live and shape our careers, refusing to slander others or practice hypocrisy. It all looks pretty ordinary, but it just might be the most effective way to demonstrate our commitment to the unseen realm. And by God's grace as we live this way before the world the returning sea will become a tide of faith that brings the gospel back to our Western shores.

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6. Account of Larry Sanger's conversion - reported by Trevin Wax at TGC (Sanger is a philosopher is co-founder of WIkipedia)
https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/wikipedias-founder-converts-christianity/

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The research and writing for this Resource Paper was done by author Stephen McAlpine. GS&C has a partnership with Stephen for 2024-2025.

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