



GRASPING THE NETTLE

NEWSLETTER

Late Autumn/Winter 2019

New Heightened Public Profile for GTN



Dr Guy Consolmagno interviewed on BBC Scotland

Dr Guy Consolmagno is the Pope's Astronomer but during his recent visit to Scotland at the invitation of Grasping the Nettle he proved himself of star quality. This was particularly evident in the amount of media coverage the visit received. On the Sunday prior to the visit almost every national Sunday newspaper in Scotland carried the story. On 31st October, with Bonfire night just days away, Guy Consolmagno was proving himself more popular than Guy Fawkes with a five minute interview on BBC's Good Morning Scotland, followed in the evening by a 10 minute spot on BBC Scotland's The Nine.

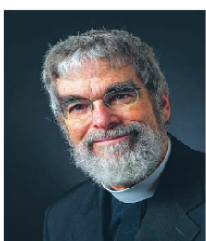
Although the Vatican Astronomer's engaging personality played well on radio and TV, the media coverage carried with it a



message about aim of interdenominational initiative Grasping the Nettle to transform the common perception of the conflict model of science v God. Scotland on Sunday coverage (below) is an excellent example of how even the headline carried the essential message about the visitor, GTN and the agenda.

And the spotlight of publicity was not just on a personality. On Wednesday 30th October national newspaper The Times published a GTN generated article in its popular Thunderer column (reproduced on the final page of this newsletter). The outcome: The GTN agenda has truly reached the public square and ready to be developed.

The Visit as Reported in Scotland on Sunday



Brother Guy Consolmagno, astronomer to the Pope (inset)

Pope's astronomer to visit Scotland to grasp the nettle of science and God's existence

By SHÂN ROSS
The Pope's stargazer is to visit Scotland for a week of events aimed at exploring the evidence for God's existence. Brother Guy Consolmagno, an American research astronomer and director of the Vatican Observatory, has accepted an invitation from the interdenominational group Grasping the Nettle (GTN). GTN is backed by Scottish

church leaders and promotes dialogue on how faith and science can work together. Brother Consolmagno, a Jesuit religious brother, a theologian and an acclaimed orator, said: "I am thrilled to be coming to Scotland to participate in the Grasping the Nettle programme. It's so important to have dialogue with students and the general public, of all faiths and sciences, on how faith

enhances our science and science our faith. Both seek truth, and find it in joy." Brother Consolmagno added: "The claim that somehow a scientist must be atheist is a holdover from the Victorian idea of materialism. But consider the 19th-century physicist James Clerk Maxwell, whose famous equations

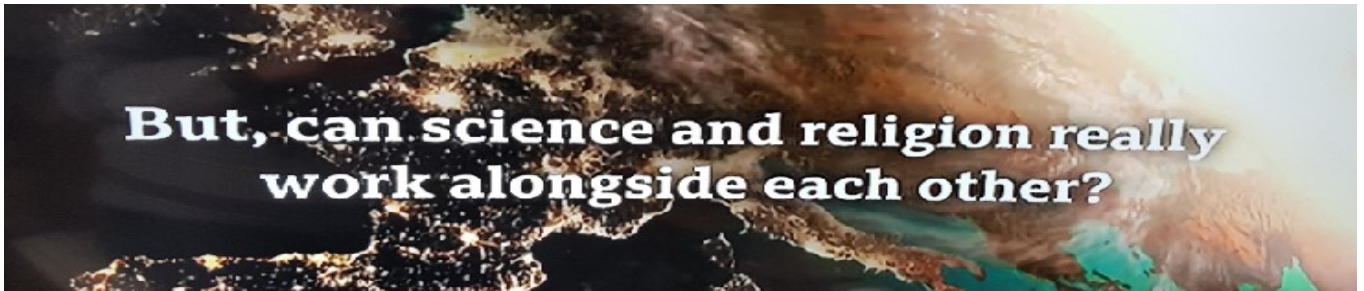
led to the overthrow of that misconception and opened the door to modern physics. He was a man of deep faith; and, of course, a Scotsman. I am honoured to visit the land of his birth." His tour will include talks and school conferences. The Very Rev John Chalmers, former Church of Scotland Moderator and

Ambassador at Large for GTN, said: "Those of us who are a part of GTN believe the search for God is not incompatible with holding a deep respect for science and its success in helping us to understand our place in the physical universe. "We are searching for meaning and purpose and, as well as exploring our inner space, we find inspiration in outer space."



Media Interviews Show Open and Genuine Interest in the GTN Agenda

With news programmes having a reputation for aggressive questioning hatched in the Jeremy Paxman school of journalism, interviewees should be prepared for a tough experience. But not one of the recent media interviews lived up to that expectation. Instead journalists questions were openly enquiring, showing genuine interest in the possibility that science and religion are not conflicting alternatives. In the BBC show *The Nine* the interview was set up with the following on screen question:



Nevertheless the line of questions showed the assumptions that are typically made when the relationship between science and God becomes distorted—as demonstrated by the opening question on *The Nine* posed by Martin Geissler, and subsequently wisely answered by Dr Consolmagno.

Q. What created the earth - God or the big bang?

A. The answer is both. Philosophy had worked this out a thousand years ago. There is the ultimate cause of the universe and then there's how it worked. My religion tells me God made the universe. My science tells me how it happened.

In the Radio Scotland interview the same predisposition to the conflict model was very evident in presenter Gary Robertson's opening question.

Q. There is a conflict between scientific discovery, the big bang theory and religious teaching that the world is much younger. How do you reconcile those two things?

The answer was similarly wise and balanced.



Back in *The Nine* studio, Martin Geissler was interrogating the conflict model with genuine interest—in particular how the six day creation narrative can sit alongside orthodox science.

Q. We hear a lot about creationism and the image I have in my head is huge swathes of schools in the States banning books with dinosaurs in them because they can't have existed because the world's not been around that long.

A. If you try to interpret Scripture as a science book you are doing a terrible disservice to scripture. Science books go out of date. Scripture doesn't. They can't be the same thing.

And the lesson is...

GTN Chairman Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison believes the questions themselves provide valuable insight into how the GTN message needs to be fine-tuned for the public square. *"The message is clear,"* he said. *"We must continue to emphasise that God and science are complementary explanations; not alternatives. Secondly we must do everything we can to communicate that six day creationism is not the orthodox Christian position."*

Hundreds of Scottish Teenagers Respond Enthusiastically to the Science and God Agenda


During his GTN visit to Scotland Dr Consolmagno addressed two senior school conferences with a combined audience of more than 300 young people—all of whom engaged with the science and God agenda. Two very different forms of organisation clearly demonstrate how the conference approach can be adapted to different situations.

St Brides Hall, Motherwell hosted 220 young people from 11 Catholic schools in the central belt—with some travelling from as far away as Fife.

The conference also featured excerpts from the *Introducing the God Question* series widely used in Scottish secondary schools. In addition, there were opportunities during the day for teachers from the schools to dialogue with Dr Consolmagno about the challenges of nurturing young people in the faith in our highly secularised society.




Addressing an audience of 220 young people on science and God



**GOD AND THE STARS:
SCIENCE & FAITH**

The Scottish Catholic Education Service
and
'Introducing The God Question' present
A day conference for teachers
and Senior Pupils with
Brother Guy Consolmagno



Speaking on behalf of GTN, 'The God Question' producer, Iain Morris, commented *"Young people are bombarded by a contemporary narrative that assumes - but rarely argues - that we have outgrown God. But young enquiring minds are open to challenge the secular assumptions of our age and their level of engagement with the subject was highly impressive"*.

Director of the Scottish Catholic Education Service, Barbara Coupar, added *"This was a phenomenal opportunity for young people to see how science and Christian faith combine and are expressed in the work of Dr Consolmagno - an erudite astronomer and a true evangelist"*.

In Q&A the quality of the questions was particularly impressive and included:

- Have you ever questioned your faith?
- Why would God create species only to become extinct?
- There are many religions. What makes you certain of the truth of yours?
- You have given us a very eloquent explanation of how science and religion relate to each other. How can the church communicate this message more adequately?



The conference delegates engage with the big issues



Teachers pose their own questions to the Pope's Astronomer

Dr Consolmagno emphasised how thrilled he was to have the opportunity to address such a substantial audience of young people. *"It is one of the greatest and most fulfilling aspects of my public work"*.

And so to Grove Academy, Dundee



As a national initiative, GTN values holding events in different parts of the country. It was therefore a delight to be invited to Grove Academy in Broughty Ferry as a result of diligent groundwork carried out by Richard Coton, General Secretary of Christian Values in Education.

For this event, Head of RE, Gerry Dillon, offered places to pupils in the 4th year. These were supplemented by around 15 pupils from 6th year who acted as group discussion facilitators. The total number of young people involved was 100.

Once more it was a spectacularly successful event. Gerry Dillon said *“I hope all the other events were as wonderful as ours. From parents on Twitter to pupils at my office door, I’ve had a hugely positive response about how inspirational our speaker was. Thanks for delivering such an amazing event”*.



RE Head Gerry Dillon with Dr Consolmagno

One highly significant outcome was Gerry Dillon’s offer to help expand this model across the country, especially using the Introducing the God Question series, specially developed for schools: www.thegodquestion.tv/introduce.

Professor John Spence, Chairman of Search for Truth Charitable Trust—sponsors of GTN—greeted the news enthusiastically. *“The success of GTN in spreading and*

sharing its agenda will be massively impacted the more that people volunteer to become part of the movement. We encourage people everywhere to consider how they can contribute to us all making an impact together.”



Grove Academy pupils swarm around their visitor with their end of session questions



As Richard Coton moves to England to be with his family he will be sadly missed by GTN. Thank you Richard for all you have done.

GTN Enters the Public Arena

Although presentations to churches and their leaders - as well as Exploring the God Question sessions - are fundamental to the GTN operation, one of its ultimate aims is to bring informed thinking and dialogue about science and God into the public square. In respect of that, the visit of Dr Consolmagno provided four major opportunities.



Glasgow University Memorial Chapel

A packed Glasgow University Memorial Chapel heard a lecture of spectacular quality. The audience was attracted through the combined publicity of the University School of Education, the Presbytery of Glasgow and the Flourish newspaper of the Archdiocese of Glasgow.

Glasgow University Chapel

Title: Adventures of a Vatican Astronomer

Subtext: What on earth can astronomy and religion have in common?



University Chaplain Rev Stuart MacQuarrie presents Dr Consolmagno with university branded souvenirs of his visit

Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow

Title: Why Do We Look Up?

Subtext: What does it tell us about us?



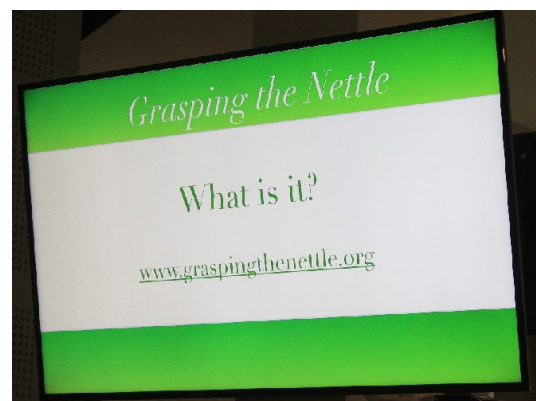
In full flow linking science and God at the Royal Philosophical Society

Notably in all of his public lectures to secular audiences Dr Consolmagno effortlessly integrated faith perspectives. Each talk began with a short introduction to Grasping the Nettle and its aims.

In every venue there was a complete absence of hostility to faith matters. Questions were genuinely enquiring.



Addressing the Royal Philosophical Society





The annual Institute of Physics lecture

Scottish Institute of Physics

Title: Strange Cosmologies

Subtext: Striving for the truth

More than one hundred attended the annual lecture of the Institute of Physics given in the Boyd-Orr Building of Glasgow University on 31st October. The introduction included information on Grasping the Nettle and why investigating the relationship between science and ultimate religious questions is so important. This relationship was a prominent and natural feature within the lecture as a whole. It was warmly received.

Dundee Science Centre

Title: The History of Strange Ideas

Subtext: The driving force to understand

A packed room at the Dundee Science Centre had attracted an audience from Perthshire in Angus as well as the city itself. Director of the Science Centre Dr Isabel Bruce said *“It’s thrilling to see the Centre as part of Dr Consolmagno’s programme and so very encouraging that there was even a waiting list for tickets”*. Organiser Rev Dr Martin Fair added *“GTN is delighted to be in partnership with the Science Centre. As we can see, the appetite for meaningful discourse on the big questions is alive and well in Scotland today”*.



Dundee Science Centre

Thank you The Dundee Courier



Dundee Courier Article on 1st November

News Coverage

The visit to Scotland of the Vatican’s astronomer was certainly deemed newsworthy by the media. Three days before the visit the story appeared in the Sunday Express, the Sunday Herald, Scotland on Sunday and the Sunday Mail. This was followed by reports in the Scotsman and the Times which also carried a GTN article on science and God. But it was the Dundee Courier which gave more column inches than any other newspaper to Dr Consolmagno’s visit, with two articles in the build up to the visit to the Dundee Science Centre and a full page splash (see opposite) on the day of the event. GTN Chairman Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison said *“Clearly GTN has come of age in the media and now we must seek to consolidate our place”*.

GTN Conference Gets Top Marks from Attendees

No this is not an advert. The 2019 GTN National Conference has already taken place with almost 90 delegates in attendance from many parts of Scotland.

The Conference title probed the evidence in science and theology, asking if one can reasonably find a sense of overall coherence and purpose in our existence - from the cosmos, to the natural world and human beings themselves.



Is there purpose in the cosmos?

Answering the question, Dr Guy Consolmagno drew a meaningful distinction between there being purpose in creation and purpose in nature. Intriguingly noting that atheists—such as zoologist Richard Dawkins and physicist Stephen Weinberg—frequently claim that nature is a blind force, the Pope’s astronomer emphasised that their conclusion is a result of their limited vision. To find purpose we need to look beyond nature to the divine concept of creation which is entirely purposeful.



Dr Denis Alexander

Is there purpose in biology?

Nevertheless, viewed through the lens of the biologist Dr Denis Alexander of the Faraday Institute in Cambridge, nature itself may indeed show evidence of purpose. Drawing from a wide variety of examples he provided evidence that, even though widely spread across the globe, different organisms find remarkably similar solutions to challenges—such as the need for sight. In meeting those challenges they evolve remarkably similar characteristics. Conclusion? Nature appears to be heading in a particular direction that is not characterised by the randomness so readily emphasised by atheists.



Rev Dr Russel Moffat

The purposeful primate

Beginning with an analysis of the purpose of Genesis 1, Rev Dr Russel Moffat went on to argue that humans are purpose driven primates. He emphasised that the human quest for answers to existential questions cannot be satisfactorily addressed through scientific descriptions of the world alone. The address was given against a background of challenges to Christian faith posed by popularised Neo-Darwinian thought.

And the conclusion?

Asked for their evaluations of the Conference overall on a scale of 1 (low) -5 (high), most respondents scored it as 5 and none lower than 4. The talks will soon be available on the GTN website.

Time to Grasp the Holly?



GRASPING THE HOLLY

© Gus

Santa has 31 hours of Christmas to work thanks to different time zones and the rotation of the earth. But do the sums. Santa's sleigh needs to move at 650 miles per second. That's 3000 times the speed of sound. It has been calculated that it involves up to 7000 visits a second. So many questions can be asked; so few credible answers could be given.

Of course Santa is a popular (some might say compulsory!) visitor to church parties and children's events but is there a danger—at least for those who believe in the truth of the nativity—of dangerously mixing fact with fiction? As children grow up, might they view the Christmas story through the same fictitious lens through which Santa is understood in their teenage years? Is there a case for a clear separation between Santa and Jesus? Should fact be separated from fiction right at the start? Could this be what is meant by grasping the holly?

Research shows that many children stop believing in God simultaneous with abandoning belief in Santa. 'Bah, humbug' you might say. But the holly still needs to be grasped.

Can it be that as Christmas dawns Grasping the Nettle might give way to grasping the holly? If so, what is the prickly issue this time? Arguably it is 'credibility'.

Christmas has evolved over 2 millennia and now groans with peripherals to the essential story. Much of it is now embedded in commercialism but other aspects of Christmas are the stuff of pure fiction. (At this point, all those under 8 should ask parental permission to read on.)

Only the young and innocently gullible could swallow the idea of an aged—yet ageless—overweight man in red delivering presents to over 200 millions of children spread over 200 million square miles. It has been pointed out that Santa doesn't appear to visit Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist children, thereby reducing the workload by 15%!



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Cartoons by Gus

The Real Star of Bethlehem



The star of Bethlehem sits atop the Church of the Nativity in the town

It may sit atop many a Christmas tree; a sparkling symbol of nothing less than Christmas itself: the star of Bethlehem. And it is not just a sweet and memorable aspect of the Christmas story; it has fascinated astronomers for centuries. Did it really exist, and if so what was it?

Perhaps strangely in a world that is increasingly secularised and inclined to consign the nativity story to the realm of fiction, even modern astronomers have

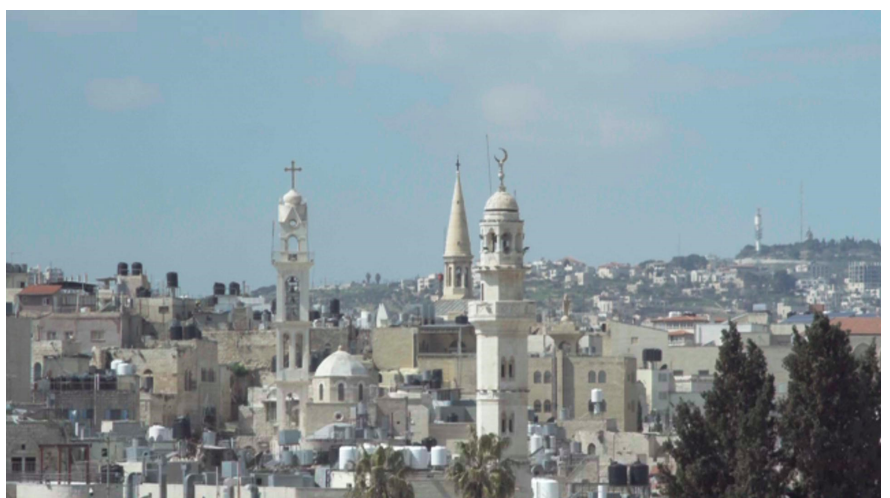
taken the star phenomenon seriously. In this, they can be encouraged by the fact that both in Babylonian tablets found in the British Museum and ancient Chinese texts claiming to record all perceptible unusual events in the night sky 2000 years ago there is clear reference to a bright new star that appeared for at least 70 days in the year 5 BC.

Possibilities include: supernovae (when a star at the end of its life explodes in shards of light), comets, meteors and unusual alignments of giant planets. Astronomers have discovered that in the night sky in Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth there was a most unusual alignment of Saturn and Jupiter that would have created the sense of a large, bright and compelling light. It was first proposed as the 'real' star of Bethlehem by the astronomer Johannes Kepler in 1804. The alignment is described as once-in-a-millennium.



The manger in Church of the Nativity

Does it matter? Biblical truth can never be dependent on science to prove it but sometimes such associations are worth pondering. Perhaps the wisest approach was well expressed by particle physicist Sir John Polkinghorne—interviewed in The God Question series—when he said in relation to such phenomena, *“I don't want to make too much of that association but neither do I want to forget that it's there”*.



Today Bethlehem is in the Palestinian territories. Churches and Mosques jostle for position in the skyline.

News from GTN

The God Question for Juniors

Many are impatient for the release of the new children's animation series on God and science. Be assured progress is steady. Programme 2 'Cooking with Gas' is in development with a target completion date of mid January 2020.



Two sections of the storyboard for episode 2: Cooking with Gas.

A New Major Documentary on Christian Apologetics: Against the Tide

During 2019 Kharis Productions has been immersed in the production of a cinematic documentary *Against the Tide*. Featuring the background story to Professor John Lennox's life of faith - in which he has challenged and met some of the world's most renowned atheists - the film is set in Oxford and Israel but with historical visits also to the world behind the Iron Curtain. Designed principally for cinemas in the USA the film is co-hosted by American actor Kevin Sorbo whose most famous movie role was Hercules in the long



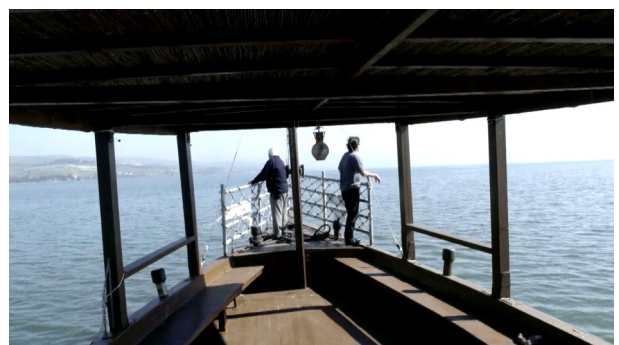
running TV series.

It is planned that the film will be launched by spring 2020 and available for screening in venues throughout the country.



Professor John Lennox with actor Kevin Sorbo at Jerusalem's Old City

If you are interested in information about bringing the film to your area please contact office@graspingthenettle.org.



Time for reflection on the Sea of Galilee

Moderator Designate is Part of the GTN Family



Rev Dr Martin Fair

From its launch in June 2015, GTN has been immensely grateful to the succession of Moderators who have been so very supportive of Grasping the Nettle. They include two Chairmen of GTN, one of whom is now our Ambassador at Large. The present Moderator is a member of the GTN Council of Advisers.

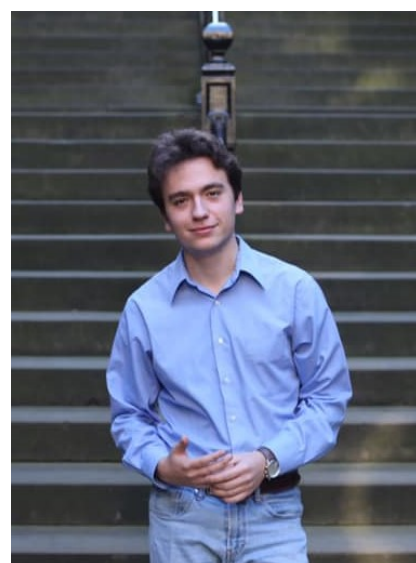
The Moderator Designate for 2020/21, Rev Dr Martin Fair, has been a very active and involved member of the GTN Steering Board from day one, taking responsibility for social media and supporting all its activities to the fullest extent. He was responsible for bringing Dr Guy Consolmagno to Dundee in October. *“I am obviously thrilled by this appointment as Moderator,”* said Dr Fair, *“and its many opportunities to serve the church. One of those for sure will be to heighten the profile of GTN.”*

Grasping the Nettle would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the recent Moderators who have so willingly supported and engaged with GTN in many ways: Very Revds Dr John Chalmers, Dr Angus Morrison, Dr Russell Barr, Susan Brown and current Moderator Rt Rev Colin Sinclair.

International Intern with a Social Media Brief for GTN

Meet Josep Marti Bouis from Barcelona. He has arrived in Edinburgh for post graduate studies in theology. Josep also comes with a deep interest in the dialogue between science and theology.

For some time GTN has been seeking one or more persons to help promote GTN, its agenda, its events and its resources on social media—and also to help initiate public dialogue. Josep, who describes himself as *“very excited to get started”*, will help develop and maintain the ground-work laid by Rev Dr Martin Fair. Rev Dr Liam Fraser who connected Josep with GTN said *“He is the ideal person to undertake the task. He is fascinated by the subject, well informed, personable and eager to be of assistance Just as significantly he is skilled in the effective use of social media”*.



University student Josep Marti. Own photo.

Connecting to GTN Spain

Inspired by the Scottish model, and with The God Question resources available in Spanish, an Iberian equivalent to GTN Scotland is taking shape in Madrid. As a native Spanish speaker (whose English is of an exceptionally high quality) Josep will also make GTN’s social media content available in Spanish.

Welcome on board Josep!

If you would be willing to help connect the GTN social media messages to your networks make sure you ‘like’ the GTN Facebook page and share its content. <https://www.facebook.com/graspingthenettle/>

Connecting Wonder-Full World Events to The God Question



The final session at Kay Park Parish Church

Although high profile GTN events attract significant attention, the backbone of its operation is the week to week engagement with its agenda that goes on in churches and other venues where groups engage with Exploring the God Question. Sometimes such groups emerge from a Wonder-Full World event—as transpired in the case of Kay Park Parish Church in Kilmarnock. After an inspiring evening of music, drama, film excerpts and

conversation with astronomer Deborah Haarsma, GTN’s Liaison Officer Rev George Lind returned to the church to provide a taster session of Exploring the God Question. The vast majority of those attending opted for the 6 week course. The sessions were reported as “*lively, engaging, informative and stimulating*”. If you would like more information about such events in your area please contact office@graspingthenettle.org or telephone Rev George Lind on 07872 051432.



Rev George Lind, GTN Liaison Officer

BLACK FRIDAY COMES TO THE GOD QUESTION

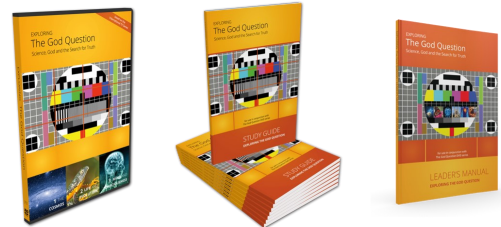


Introducing the God Question. Designed for individual use and/or use in schools

SALE!
60% off

all resources
until midnight

Tuesday 3rd December



Exploring the God Question. Designed for individual use and/or use with Church groups. Also available to web stream.

“Too often non believing celebrities are matched against passionate but less prepared believers. But this (series) is what the truly interested have been waiting for. It is an absolutely stunning presentation; a heavy weight fair exposure to both sides. All believers and non believers should watch all three episodes.” (Amazon VOD Reviewer)

To secure this amazing offer go either to www.thegodquestion.tv/explore or www.thegodquestion.tv/introduce and enter the code **TGQFRIDAY** at the checkout!

Beyond These Shores

The God Question TV series has been broadcast to hundreds of millions of people across the world, while in its DVD format the series has spread to more than 60 countries, including unexpected destinations such as Afghanistan and Japan. (Exploring the God Question is now also available to web-stream and with digital study guide.) However the 'home countries' remain a target area and so it is especially pleasing that the study series is being used effectively in Belfast. The prime mover is Robin Murphy who first encountered The God Question, while living in Sunderland. Using the local Toby restaurant as the meeting place thousands of invitations were distributed around his home area. Long after the sessions had concluded Robin found himself in ongoing discussions with a number who had come as atheists but wanted to continue to talk about God.



Now living in Belfast, Robin has continued to engage the local community in the big questions. His latest initiative made use of the Dock Café at Belfast Harbour. Here he recounts his experience.

A series of Big questions exploratory discussion sessions were held in earlier this year in two different settings for two different sets of people.. The sessions made use of the Exploring the God Question documentary programmes. The approach taken in the discussions allowed each person to think about and express their own views and also listen to the views of others. The presentation of both atheist and theist viewpoints allowed participants to consider and weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of the various arguments presented - all the while thinking about what it is that causes us to believe what we believe.

All who attended expressed their enjoyment of the sessions and appreciated the opportunity to discuss these matters in an open setting. We have found that key to the success of these events is having participants who will make good use of the opportunity presented for

developing meaningful, genuine relationships where trust grows along with humble, honest conversations about how we find ultimate truth. A Chinese PhD student who later became a Christian said that the Big Questions sessions (including the ETGQ material) were the "most important factor" that led him to that decision.



HMS Caroline in Belfast Harbour near where the Dock Café is situated.

Photo Credit: Dom0803 at English Wikipedia

Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small jobs (Henry Ford)

Grasping the Nettle aims to present rational Christian perspectives in answers to the big questions of life. We believe that our faith is the best of all explanations for existence. We believe that the majority of people are open to engaging with the big questions but we need your help. To discuss options please join others who have been in touch to offer their services. Contact office@graspingthenettle.org

Visit to Scotland of Professor Alister McGrath

Save the Dates—1-3 October 2020!



Alister McGrath

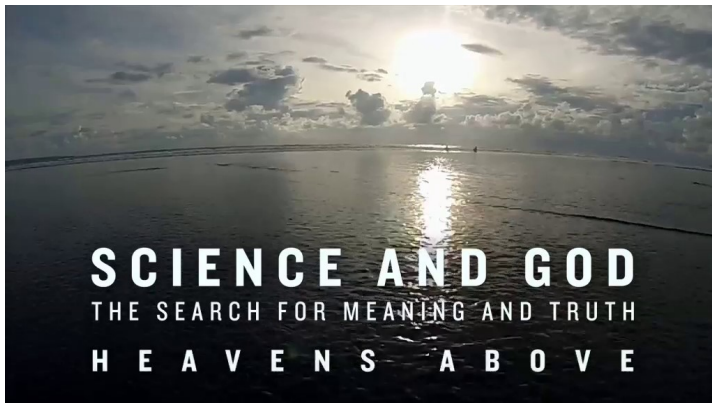
Photo Credit: Matthias Asgeirsson

Grasping the Nettle is delighted to announce the visit in 2020 of Professor Alister McGrath, Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford. He is also President of the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics.

Alister McGrath's initial academic work was in the natural sciences. Thereafter he turned to the study of theology and the history of ideas. A prolific author, many of his books explore the relationship between science and religion. They include *The Dawkins Delusion?*, *Dawkins' God*, *The Twilight of Atheism*, *Mere Apologetics* and *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. He has also written a substantial biography of CS Lewis.

Be sure to save the dates to benefit from the richness of Professor McGrath's contribution to GTN: Thursday 1st to Saturday 3rd October 2020.

New Global Version of The God Question Series Ready to Launch

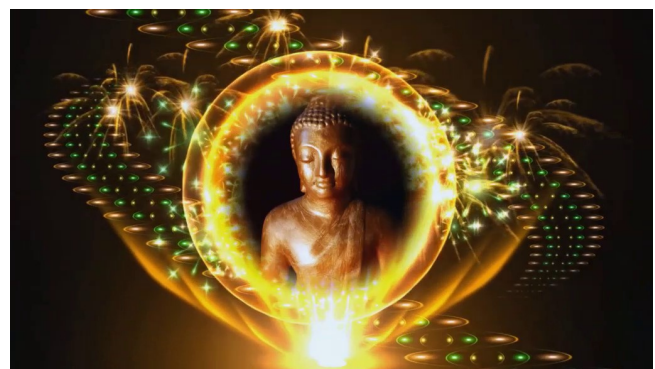


Programme One Title Frame

When a translation of *The God Question* into Chinese was requested two years ago enthusiasm for the idea quickly gave way to some reservations. How would a series produced in the West really relate to Chinese culture and Oriental heritage and religious ideas? For example, whereas the concept 'God' might be generally shared in Western culture, the word can have different connotations in other societies. Consequently a decision was taken to

reshape the original series, remove up to 50% of its content and replace it with film specially shot in the Far East.

The result of that decision has been the production of 'God and Science: The Search for Meaning and Truth'. Although principally made for a Far Eastern audience, reviews of the programmes have unanimously concluded that its relevance is global. The series is made in English though several interviewees contribute in Mandarin. The series can be viewed with subtitles in English and Mandarin - in both simplified and traditional forms. Alister McGrath is one of the contributors to the new version of the series.



The series considers the answers given to the big questions by Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity—and atheism.

The series will be launched in early 2020. More details will be given in future newsletters.

Scotland Suddenly Loses its Astronomer Royal

Though he declared himself a sceptic on matters of God's existence, Scotland's Astronomer Royal, Professor John Brown had an interesting association with Grasping the Nettle. It is with deep regret that we became aware of his sudden passing on Sunday 17th November 2019.

John Brown and GTN



Dr Antony Latham and Prof John Brown in conversation about God and science

GTN's first encounter with John Brown was when he participated in his role as astronomer at a Wonder-Full World event held in Kyleakin, Skye in March 2018. In addition to the inclusion of music, drama and film excerpts, Wonder-Full World events feature conversations with scientists. The Kyleakin audience experienced two interpretations of the wonders of our existence. GTN's Dr Antony Latham interpreted the evidence as pointers to there being a mind

behind the universe whereas Professor Brown found the problem of suffering a major obstacle to drawing that conclusion.

A Wonder-Full World Legacy?

Subsequent to the event John Brown developed a friendship—and a conversation about God with one of the principal organisers of the event, Free Church Minister Rev Roddie Rankin. One of those conversations was to have taken place in November. Commenting, Rev Rankin described himself as *“greatly upset”* by Professor Brown's death and added *“Our ministry contacts and friendships have great poignancy and an eternal dimension”*.



A substantial audience gathers in Kyleakin for the Wonder-Full World event in March 2018

John Brown and the Pope's Astronomer



John Brown introduced Guy Congolmagno to the Royal Philosophical Society on 30th October

The most recent GTN contact with Professor Brown was when he chaired the October meeting of the Royal Philosophical Society in Glasgow at which Dr Guy Consolmagno spoke.

In his subsequent vote of thanks, Prof Brown specifically thanked the speaker for the spiritual insights that had been part of the presentation.

Our condolences go to Margaret Brown and the family. The funeral on 6th December will take place in Cardross Crematorium but presiding will be Rev Rory MacLeod of Broadford Parish Church, Skye. It is worth pondering the significance of the fact that the funeral service of the principal sceptic at the Kyleakin event will be taken by a minister of the gospel.

As Grasping the Nettle attempts to spread its impact and influence across the nation, why not take the opportunity to introduce others to GTN and begin by sharing this newsletter with them?

Science or God? (The GTN originated article printed in The Times on Wednesday 30 October 2019)

Taking issue with the black and white world of binary choice

Thai curry or chicken pie? Not the sort of question normally likely to cause mental stress but these are not normal days. There it was: yet another decision making crossroads with its associated tension. Easily laughed off but some choices are more serious.

Beyond the dinner table we increasingly appear to live in a binary world where colossally important basic choices are now the stuff of every day life. Europe: in or out? Scottish independence: yes or no. All part of a world unwilling to compromise as Theresa May found to her political cost.

But it is not just in politics that stark choices are being thrust upon us. Another referendum walks the streets, sometimes quietly, sometimes noisily. The question? Science or God?

Behind referenda lie manifestos. The atheist version offers a world of rational thought in which supernatural explanations are consigned to the dustbin of history. Religious answers to the big questions of life, according to Richard Dawkins, one of the authors of the manifesto "are now superseded and outdated".

Science OR God! Take your pick; you can't have both!

And what of the religious manifesto? Therein lies a problem: there is more than one. A version of it claims that the account of origins in the book of Genesis is scientific gospel. Any clash with orthodox physics, biology and geology puts science in the wrong. For sure, it's science OR God.

But there is another narrative that eschews the imposition of the choice and calls into question the assumptions on which it is predicated. Essentially it stands for science AND God.

This week Scotland is visited by the Pope's senior astronomer, Dr Guy Consolmagno. He is also a Jesuit priest. Is this a form of intellectual schizophrenia or can there truly be an accommodation of science with God?

While the conflict model frequently comes pre-loaded with the view that science and God are alternative explanations, perhaps the best explanation of all combines insights from both.

And there is much to explain! The wonders of our existence are spectacularly complex and unlikely in the extreme. Nick Longrich, senior lecturer in palaeontology and evolutionary biology at the University of Bath, declares that - in addition to human intelligence - complex cells, photosynthesis and life itself were unique one-off events in biological history and therefore highly improbable. In the realm of physics, the world famous Steven Weinberg explains that the expansion of the universe (of which we are generally unaware and on which we are completely dependent) is fine-tuned to 56 decimal places. That's a lot of luck to get right. Can this be evidence of science AND God?

It leaves much to explore and is the territory of a national and interdenominational Scottish initiative Grasping the Nettle (GTN) www.graspingthenettle.org. It promotes education and respectful public dialogue on issues related to science and God. The visit of the Pope's astronomer is part of GTN's programme of events.

In preparing the menu for the conference events at Heriot-Watt University on 2nd November, the organisers were delighted to learn that, for lunch, each delegate would be offered five substantial savouries and two desserts. A welcome breakthrough in the tension-filled world of binary choice! **Science or God?**

Taking issue with the black and white world of binary choice

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