



GRASPING THE NETTLE

NEWSLETTER

Autumn/Winter 2020

FIVE YEAR LANDMARK FOR GTN



GTN National Dinner 2015

A mere 'new-born' in the middle of the last decade, Grasping the Nettle celebrated its 5th anniversary in 2020. Now the national and interdenominational initiative has developed and expanded to the point where it is widely known and appreciated across the country and beyond. Formally launched at a dinner in the Doubletree by Hilton Glasgow Hotel in 2015 with guest speaker, psychiatrist Dr Glynn Harrison of Bristol University, his topic - appropriately - was 'God in the Mind?'. The way that science makes the presence of our invisible Creator evident and apparent, deepens and encourages Christian belief and there is no more intriguing a forum in which to

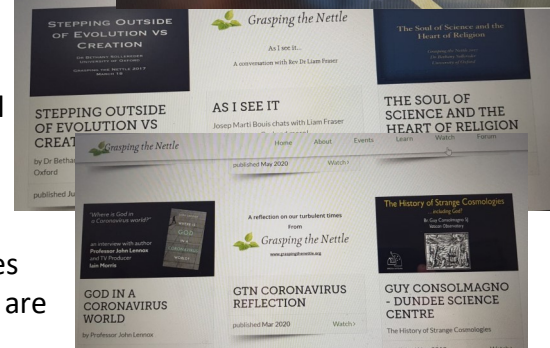
do so than in the mysterious and wonderful forum of the human mind. Dr Harrison's memorable talk is available to view in the 'Watch' section of the GTN website. Commenting on the five year anniversary, current GTN chairman, Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison, said *"Grasping the Nettle is one of the most significant and important initiatives of our time. In taking head-on the misinformation that science and God are incompatible it provides a vital service for believers and sceptics alike."*

A special report **Grasping the Nettle 5 Years On: Looking Back and Looking Forward** has just been released. Yes it is naturally retrospective but also looks forward to how GTN plans to expand and develop its agenda in its next phase. Request your copy from office@graspingthenettle.org.

GTN ANSWERS THE LOCKDOWN CHALLENGE

Never before has the whole world faced the same challenge: *that of living in - and with - lockdown, isolation - as well as confusion - about how living, relating and operating can somehow be maintained.* (In case you missed it, the dislocation can even be symbolised in sentence construction!) Never before has the whole world shared the same feelings of detachment from the mainstream of life. Yet emerging from the physical and social imprisonment has come a fresh sense of life's essentials; primarily among them - the importance of relationship. Enter technology with new possibilities and new vocabulary including the ubiquitous 'Zoom': people reconnected; services resumed, albeit in a new form resembling a sci-fi movie. We are *all* on the screen now!

No surprise then that Grasping the Nettle embraced such new opportunities too and has positively erupted with an array of new online formats. From straightforward interviews to thought provoking presentations in words and music and even an international conference, GTN has attempted not quite 'business as usual' but certainly a range of online productions to suit every need and taste. See for yourself in the '[Watch](#)' section of the GTN website. www.graspingthenettle.org.



Sample of 'Watch' material from the GTN website

And Now the New..... GOD QUESTION FOR STARTERS

Since its launch, the success of The God Question series has prompted other enquiries – such as ‘Could there be a version that can be absorbed and studied more quickly?’ And also requested ‘Can we have a format that can be used in very short units for when time is at a premium?’ So there was born the new **The God Question for Starters**. *“Each of the three main themes of the original series has been covered in just 10 excerpts of 3-5 minutes each,”* explained associate producer Karen Rollins. *“Each one has a title, clearly flagging up the content, and an on-screen question at the end”*. All episodes have an online Users’ Guide which lists and summarises the content of each extract and also provides the question. *“For a long time I have been impressed by resources that are versioned for different audiences,”* Karen added. *“We get many such requests - including from prisons. After a time of ‘intending to do it’ the task has been completed and we are delighted by the take up and response.”*



For more information or to use in your context write to office@graspingthenettle.org. GTN personnel are willing to assist—or even lead—your sessions.

IS THERE CONVINCING EVIDENCE GOD EXISTS?

Church of Scotland Moderator asks ‘The God Question’ with GTN



It would surely be noteworthy if a prominent Christian leader appeared to question the foundation of his faith and could even be on the verge of losing it! *“That is just **not** what this is about,”* said the Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. *“However, unless we have solid reasons for embracing faith in God and in Christ, our beliefs are on poorly substantiated foundations.”* The God Question series, which is a core resource promoted and used by Grasping the Nettle, was produced to help viewers encounter the big issues about science and God and to help them evaluate if science points inexorably towards the existence of a creator or

explains him out of existence! *“And that is why, once more, I invited people across Scotland to join me in examining the evidence,”* added Dr Fair. *“And join they did”*. Participants from across the whole country, including the far north, but also from parts of England gathered over three evenings to think through the big issues presented by the science of the cosmos, life on earth and mind and consciousness. On this occasion The God Question for Starters had its first public airing and proved to be a very popular alternative to the six sessions required for the full God Question series. *“This version of the series is designed to be very fast paced,”* said Dr Fair, *“and facilitates equally fast paced discussion. The programmes have the very positive effect of leaving everyone wishing there was more time.”*



Zooming in on the Big Questions

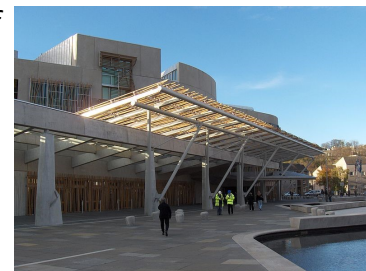
Consequently GTN plans to offer some online discussion opportunities on specific issues arising. The first will be on the ‘The Mind’. Details to be announced.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2020: AN ONLINE FIRST FOR GTN



Professor McGrath live on Zoom

It was an unprecedented event for GTN: the national conference for 2020, held via Zoom. *"It was a difficult decision to make,"* commented one of the organisers. *"First we had the disappointment of having to cancel three days of special events with our international speaker and world famous author, Professor Alister McGrath. Then we had the challenge of wondering if we could rescue our conference plans and question if our audience would make the switch."*



No entry on this occasion for GTN

Originally, GTN had planned a dinner to highlight its ecumenical character. The event would also mark the Church of Scotland's SRT group's 50th anniversary. Next was to be a high profile event in the Scottish Parliament. The sponsorship of key MSPs had already been secured. So wouldn't a downplayed conference by Zoom be a damp squib close to the eve of Guy Fawkes night? It proved to be otherwise. Around 200 participants signed up for an event that attracted interest from England, Canada, Spain, Norway and both coasts of America.



The Q&A session led by Martin Fair

Taking as the theme of three lectures **Through a Glass Darkly** Professor McGrath took his intrigued audience on three personal journeys into the worlds of science, faith, doubt and certainty.

One of the highlights of the 3 part event was the Q & A session led by Church of Scotland Moderator Dr Martin Fair. The audience was astonished by the fluent and penetrating answers of our distinguished guest. These have been since assembled into the programme *An Audience with Alister McGrath* and can be viewed in the '[Watch](#)' section of the GTN website.

The responses to the conference were highly positive as this sample below demonstrates.

"...that was one of the best conferences I've ever attended"

"Brilliant – scholarly – thoughtful"

"I found the whole experience so wonderful!"

"Keep doing what you're doing - enriching peoples' lives, as you do with mine".

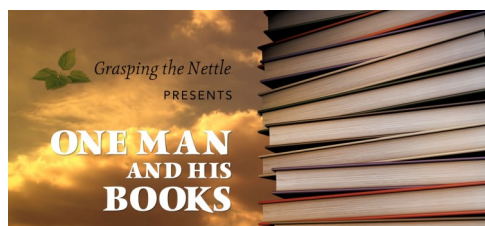
"You have continued the high standard of GTN events"

"Food for further meditation, prayer and worship too"

"A superb conference"

"The whole production was excellent and the speaker amazing!"

GETTING TO KNOW 'ONE MAN AND HIS BOOKS'



Most who own anything that answers to the description 'library', most likely admire and enjoy the feast of intellectual riches that perch on those shelves. But how much of the content has been absorbed? So what if there were a way, economic of time and effort, to learn in just thirty minutes what a famous Christian author writes about, why and for whom? What are the recurring messages and themes?

Cue one of GTN's latest online programmes, ONE MAN AND HIS BOOKS.

First into the arena was University Professor of Science and Religion, Alister McGrath. *"Author of more than 50 books, the challenge was one of selection,"* said interviewer for GTN, Iain Morris. *"But one way of distilling an agenda from such an array of possibilities is to ask the author which books they most want to talk about. And another intriguing question: which are your personal favourites and why?"*



Alister McGrath

Following Alister McGrath, next under the reading light was Professor John Lennox, also of Oxford University. Although famous for his publications on science and God, when asked to name the work he thought was the most significant, he said, surprisingly, Well why not access the programme and find out in the '[Watch](http://www.graspingthenettle.org)' section of www.graspingthenettle.org.



John Lennox

SCRIPTURE AND THE GOD QUESTION

"After several years of exploring science and the God question across the country, the question most asked next is 'Yes but how does that square with what the Bible says?'" So reports Professor John Spence, Chairman of Search for Truth Charitable Trust - which sponsors both The God Question series and GTN.

In response, a new publication is on the verge of being finalised: **Scripture and the God Question**. One of its chief contributors is Rev Dr Fergus Macdonald, former Chair of the global organisation United Bible Societies.



Rev Dr Fergus Macdonald

"In bringing this publication to the Christian public, we not only offer the opportunity to engage with Scripture against a background of scientific understanding," said Dr Macdonald, *"we also encourage a close encounter with selected Bible passages in two main ways: by meditating on the text in an uncluttered way and thereafter by studying sections of Scripture in an informed way."*

At the heart of the publication are eight Scripture Engagements, all related to the theme of Creation. *"It is a theme that runs from Genesis to Revelation,"* Professor Spence emphasised. *"And it raises some hugely challenging and interesting questions. As you would expect, many arise from the early chapters of Genesis. We don't propose 'the answer' but rather provide a range of thought-through options for readers to consider and discuss. We are not aware of anything quite like this in Christian bookshops."*



Designed principally for group Bible study and discussion, the publication will also suit individual use. Dr Macdonald points out that 'choice' is a key design element, commenting that a specific section of the work outlines a variety of approaches that can be taken to how the material is used. *"We even invite users to choose the questions they wish to discuss,"* he said. The publication can be used as 'stand alone' or in conjunction with

the Exploring the God Question series. To be kept in touch with plans for the release of Scripture and the God Question, write to office@graspingthenettle.org.

MOVING AGAINST THE TIDE: A MAJOR NEW CINEMATIC FILM

Grasping the Nettle was initiated five years ago to challenge the prevailing view that belief in God is no more than wishful thinking and that science provides the final nail in the Creator's coffin.

Now *Against the Tide* a major new film from Kharis Productions, producers of The God Question series, continues the challenge on a world stage. Featuring Professor John Lennox, the film charts his very public - and well publicised - engagements with world renowned atheists, while also documenting his experience, in the late twentieth century, promoting the Christian world view behind the Iron Curtain. The first part of the film also explores why John Lennox believes that science reveals clear evidence of a Creator while part two travels to Israel to examine the evidence that the Creator was revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.



Behind the scenes at the filming of *Against the Tide*

Released in the USA in November 2020 to highly positive reviews, the film will be available to view in Scotland early next year. More information from office@graspingthenettle.org

You can view the trailer [here](#).

RE-ROUTING THE NETTLE



Kristiansand, Norway

Advanced discussions continue with colleagues in Norway about a partnership with GTN which would see their sharing of key resources and other forms of co-operative activity. Dr Lars Dahle of NLA University in Oslo said "We see in Grasping the Nettle a model that is very relevant to what we want to achieve in Norway and we look forward to many ways in which we can work co-operatively."

More information will be given in the next newsletter.



KEEP IN DAILY TOUCH WITH GTN VIA FACEBOOK

Follow and 'like' our daily updates on Facebook for thought-provoking ideas, science-latest and intriguing offerings from Gus our resident GTN cartoonist. Visit the WATCH section of our website to read the humorous but poignant cartoon booklet 'Do You Believe in Gus?'

TO PROFESSOR DAVID FERGUSON: CONGRATULATIONS



Josep Marti Bouis with Professor David Fergusson in 'As I See It'

On top of an already distinguished career, and having been Professor of Divinity for 20 years at The University of Edinburgh, Professor David Fergusson has been appointed as the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge - a post set up on the instructions of Henry VIII in 1540. Professor Fergusson has been a member of GTN's Council of Advisers from its inception. He contributed a memorable lecture to the first Grasping the Nettle conference and has given wise counsel and support on many occasions. We very much hope GTN will continue to benefit from his involvement, especially with the arrival of Zoom culture.

GTN offers heartiest congratulations to Professor Fergusson along with every good wish and expectation of his continuing significant impact on human understanding.

View Professor Fergusson's most recent contribution to GTN in our latest '[As I See it](#)' programme hosted by Josep Marti Bouis.



TO CHIEF RABBI LORD SACKS: A RELUCTANT GOODBYE



Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks

It was with great sadness that we learned of the death from cancer of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks on 8th November, age 72. Though he probably had never heard of GTN, it is certain he would have approved of its ecumenical and its explorative character. Admired far beyond the Jewish community for his learning, his wisdom and his gracious demeanour, Lord Sacks opposed fundamentalism in all its harmful forms. His book 'Not in God's Name' is a classic. A principal contributor to 'The God Question' series, Lord Sacks gave a memorable interview. *"I will never forget that interview,"* commented producer Iain Morris. *"His whole focus was our conversation. Clearly it was a subject that was a priority for him:*

evidence for God coming from the lens of science. He spoke with memorable passion, insight and wisdom. To discuss Genesis with such a scholar was an immense privilege." The full interview with Lord Sacks will be made available on one of our websites. Details to be announced.

COSY ON WINTER NIGHTS

While cosiness in cold and frosty weather is always an attractive idea, in this case COSY has nothing to do with heat! Rather the letters represent 'Church of Scotland Youth'. GTN Liaison Officer George Lind has just completed a God Question for Starters group with some members from the Glasgow Presbytery. As word spread, they were joined by others from Ayrshire and Edinburgh. Responding to these successful discussions Rev Lind said *"It was an absolute pleasure to experience how these young people engaged and resonated with the big questions. The maturity of their thinking offers a bright future for the church in Scotland."*



A NOT SO MERRY CHRISTMAS

No nativity this year because the Wise Men face a travel ban.

And yes, the shepherds have been furloughed.

The Inn has been forced to close under Covid restrictions.

Neither can Santa travel with his requisite half dozen reindeer since that breaks the rule of six.

As for Rudolph! With that red nose he needs to quarantine and should be taking a test!



But presents are still permitted! Why not give the gift of Exploring the God Question to someone this Christmas? www.thegodquestion.tv/explore and click on 'store'

Clearly governments have been in turmoil: what to do about lockdown at Christmas! The rules are now emerging. For some there is relief; for others consternation: how to identify the three households when there are more than three deserving a place at the family table. Even the Queen is no exception and the journalists are asking "Which Royals will be in the Queen's bubble for Christmas?" Could Christmas 2020 produce the strife and offence so often associated with family weddings and funerals? Hopefully not but for sure Christmas this year will be less 'merry' than usual.



The problem of course is with the social wrap-around, not the message. The good news of Christmas rings out as clearly as ever on frosty winter air, despite our socially fogged circumstances: *"that God was made man in Palestine; and lives today in bread and wine"* (John Betjeman). What the season represents speaks more loudly in our quietened socially restricted circumstances. In these socially distanced circumstances may we use the extra time and space to come closer to the Christ of Bethlehem: God Incarnate.

"For to you is born this day a Saviour, Christ the Lord"

God is not in lockdown!

Happy Christmas from GTN!

Finally... Thanks to all who support GTN with your participation in events, general promotion of its activities and, not least of all, with your financial support. Donations to GTN can be given at www.graspingthenettle.org.

GTN is an interdenominational initiative of churches in Scotland, using Exploring the God Question as its key resource. It is administered by Search for Truth Charitable Trust (Charity No: SC039465. Company No: SC340300), a registered charity and private limited company registered in Scotland.

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