



GRASPING THE NETTLE

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2021

How Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?

A Perspective from Professor John Lennox

Easter! A time when the world celebrates in ways as diverse as consuming chocolate eggs and Easter bunnies, to pilgrimages and dawn services—covid permitting! Coinciding with emergence of spring flowers and higher temperatures, Easter is a time to shed the mentality and clothes of winter. **But for those interested, Easter has a much deeper meaning: the ultimate evidence of the truth of Christianity.** But in an era dominated by science and technology can such a belief be sustained by rational minds? They don't come more rational than philosopher of science and mathematician Professor John Lennox of Oxford University. GTN asked him our headline question.



The site of The Garden Tomb in East Jerusalem. Jesus might have been buried over a weekend in a tomb like this one.

The resurrection of Jesus! Are we to take this as an actual event in history? If we do, then it was clearly something supernatural and we shall rapidly meet the objection that this is anti-science. After all the Scottish philosopher David Hume simply stated that “miracles are violations of the laws of nature”. Understandably those who hold this view resent and reject the idea that some god could intervene and alter -“violate” - these laws. That would overturn the very basis of our scientific understanding of the universe. To such a mind, the resurrection is best ascribed to beliefs of a primitive pre-scientific culture where people were ignorant of the laws of nature and so readily accepted miracle stories. However this is not so.

Knowledge of the laws of nature is crucial to recognising miracle. You cannot perceive something as abnormal, if you do not know what is normal. The ancient world knew the law of nature as well as we do: that dead bodies do not get up out of graves. Christianity won its way because of the sheer weight of evidence that one man had actually risen from the dead!

Miracles and the Laws of Nature

The laws of the nature are our descriptions of what normally happens - they predict what is bound to occur if there is no intervention. Claiming that, because we know those laws, God could not intervene in his own creation would be like saying that knowledge of the law of gravity would make it impossible to believe that anyone could intervene and catch a falling apple! If one admits the existence of a Creator, the door is inevitably open for that same Creator to intervene in the universe that he created normally to run according to certain laws. David Hume was incorrect to assert that miracles “violate” the laws of nature. Christians claim that Jesus rose from the dead by supernatural power. By themselves, the laws of nature cannot rule out that possibility.



The huge structure inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the Old City of Jerusalem, marking the orthodox site of the place of Jesus' burial.

Read more in a similar vein from John Lennox in ‘Can Science Explain Everything?’



Against the Tide, a new cinematic release produced by Kharis Productions Ltd, features why John Lennox believes that there is overwhelming evidence for the truth of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead 2000 years ago. View the trailer here <https://againstthetide.movie/watch-trailer/>



Events in the Garden of Gethsemane also feature in Against the Tide. The key question is “Was all this strictly necessary? Could God not simply forgive?”



In a street leading to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre John Lennox explains to co-presenter Kevin Sorbo why he thinks the resurrection has unrivalled explanatory power in relation to events in Jerusalem 2000 years ago.

If you are interested to arrange a screening of Against the Tide when safe to do so, please write to info@kharisproductions.com . Look out too for information from GTN about where to buy the film.



DRAMA KIRK

Bringing the Gospel to Life

With Arms Wide Open **Luke's Passion Story** ***Easter Saturday (3rd April)***

2pm

<https://www.youtube.com/hamiltonold>

Passion Plays have been part of community life going back as far as the 13th century. Sometimes performances lasted more than a week. Now Passion Plays are being resurrected, with polished



performances having recently become part of the annual schedule at Hamilton Old Parish Church. Drama Kirk's formation at HOPC has brought alive many episodes from Scripture throughout the year.

Pandemic restrictions discourage such forms of street theatre presently. Instead the performance has been filmed, giving access to a much wider audience than could gather on the streets.

Drama Kirk's 2021 Passion Play tells the Easter story from the perspective of Gospel writer Luke, putting Jesus' story together years after his death and hearing from the disciples what their encounters had meant for them. It also includes a series of flashbacks to that final, fatal week.

Filmed during lockdown, the 30minute film features two professional actors in the roles of Jesus and Luke, as well as members of the Drama Kirk team.



A scene from the 2018 Passion Play in Hamilton



A section of a pre-pandemic crowd observing the Passion Play

Further information can be found at www.facebook.com/DramaKirk or on twitter @PlayLanarkshire. "With Arms Wide Open" will be broadcast on YouTube on Easter Saturday (3rd April) at 2pm on the following link -

<https://www.youtube.com/hamiltonold>

GTN Online: Unlocking Lockdown

Although most have struggled to find any silver lining in the covid cloud, Grasping the Nettle has taken the opportunity to expand its online presence. As reported in the Autumn 2020 Newsletter, the National Conference with Professor Alister McGrath drew audiences from different parts of the world. Now GTN online, led principally by Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, has become a regular part of the schedule.

EVENT: Neuroscience Meets the God of the Letter to the Colossians

For those who believe in the reality of a spiritual dimension to human experience—and the existence of a transcendent reality—what might neuroscience tell us about the mechanisms involved? To begin to address this deep mystery, GTN has turned to psychotherapist Dr Peter Bowes, Professor of Psychiatric Genetics Douglas Blackwood, and Consultant Neurologist Dr Ian Morrison. The question drew a hugely interested audience. A printed presentation of a paper by



Peter Bowes can be found in the drop-down menu in the 'Watch' section of the GTN website. With the session only tantalisingly able to begin addressing the big questions, a decision was made to continue the event via a series of contributions to a GTN forum. Questions being addressed include:

- How are brain, mind and consciousness connected?
- How can our consciousness connect with God?
- How can I know that my encounter with God is genuine and not delusional?

There have been over 500 'reads' to date. View the Forum here <https://www.graspingthenettle.org/forum/more-mind>



EVENTS x2: Understanding the Atheist Mind

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R Covey argues that to “seek first to understand” is crucially important. Two sessions were held in the latter part of February in which philosopher, author and apologist Peter S Williams helped the audience to understand how atheists typically think about God (session 1) and about Jesus (session 2).

Naturally Christian reactions to atheist beliefs about God and about Jesus were also well represented in the presentation and subsequent discussion. Questions reigned in on the presenter who skilfully responded to even the toughest issues. The short presentations initiating discussion on both evenings will soon be available to view on the 'Watch' section of the GTN website.

An important outcome of these sessions led to an invitation to some atheist friends to convene for further discussion on 22nd March in a session entitled A Meeting of Minds.



Peter S Williams

EVENT: A Meeting of Minds

Having two or more characters 'walk into a bar' is a well established and humorous way of setting up contrasting positions on an issue.

GTN's most recent online event was a metaphorical example. The brainchild of GTN Board Member Rev Dr Liam Fraser, this very popular session brought together Christian and humanist spokespersons with a view to conducting constructive dialogue. In lockdown conditions, bar stools are vacant but the GTN Zoom screen was crammed with almost 80 attendees.

In his presentation Liam Fraser emphasised a positive role for scepticism in, for example, enabling us to challenge bad theology. He also advised sceptics to be sceptical of their scepticism—especially in relation to the accustomed stereotypical image of God that is assumed - and consequently rejected. Liam observed that *"Often Christians don't believe in that kind of God either!"*

In his presentation, President of the Edinburgh University Humanist and Secular Society Daniel Sharp recapped on his own journey away from Christianity. Disincentivising his belief, is his deep discomfort with "Fuzzies and Fundies". Fuzzies are so vague and apologetic about their 'beliefs' that there seems no reason to hold them. Fundies are so off-puttingly dogmatic that their fortress view is easily resisted. Helpfully both presenters agreed that they share a commitment to truth. Naturally there was extensive discussion to follow and a commitment to further dialogue.

Reflecting on the event, GTN Director of Programmes Iain Morris said *"For sure, for both sides, this was an 'out of the box' event that brought a very informative exchange of views. Although the 90 minute session had limitations in how much could be addressed and discussed, the event successfully modelled that constructive dialogue between Christians and sceptics is not only viable but should be encouraged."*



A Christian and an Atheist walk into a bar... the police waste no time in arresting them for breaking lockdown restrictions!



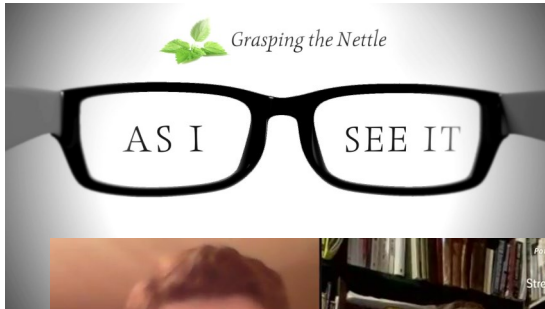
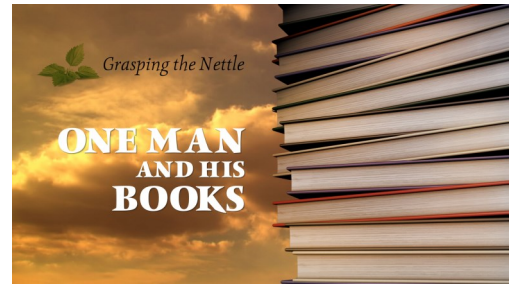
A common commitment to truth can have unexpected consequences.

"YOU DON'T NEED TO DEFEND A TIGER. YOU JUST NEED TO LET IT OUT ITS CAGE."

Cartoons by Gus

Watch with GTN

Throughout lockdown GTN has continued to add to its popular series including **One Man and His Books**. View the latest programme with author Peter S Williams in which he discusses *A Sceptics Guide to Atheism, Outgrowing God?, Resurrection: Faith or Fact, Getting At Jesus* and more.



The latest As I See it. View it in the Watch section of the GTN website www.graspingthenettle.org

As I See It, with post-graduate student presenter, Josep Marti Bouis, continues to attract substantial audiences. Live on Facebook at the time of recording, the programmes are then available on the Watch section of the website. Josep's latest guest is Marty Folsom, Executive Director of the Pacific Association of Theological Studies USA. Marty's father, a scientist, 'converted out of the church'. His mother was not an intellectual but had a deep faith and a tender heart. A very relational person in contrast with his father, Josep's guest described his church as 'not very relational'. In his opening statement, Marty announces that he spent 25 years asking the question 'What does it mean to connect with God as a relational being?' Worth finding out!

Upcoming on Watch with GTN

- Peter S Williams' presentations: Understanding the Atheist Mind on God and on Jesus
- Liam Fraser's and Daniel Sharp's presentations on theism and atheism in A Meeting of Minds

Looking Ahead with GTN Online

Coming up...

Wednesday 7th April 7.30 pm

WOW

**Anyone for Statins?
- and other Health Conundrums**

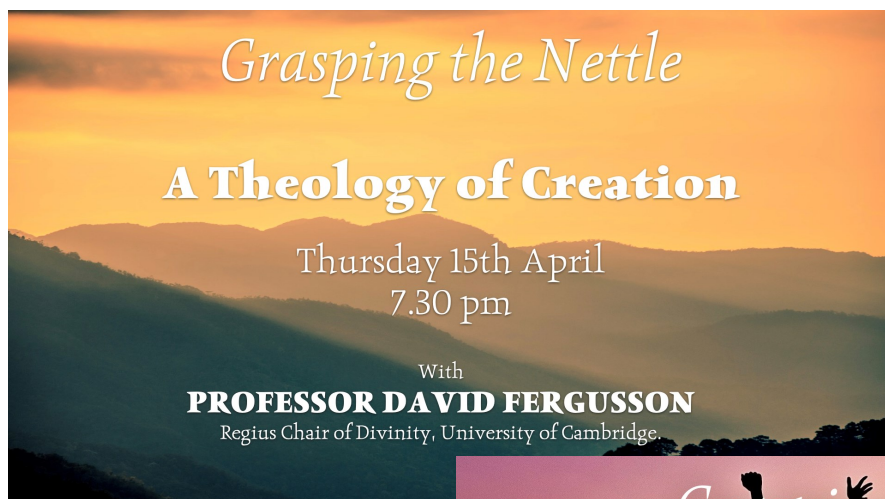
With Professor Chris Packard

email office@graspingthenettle.org to register your interest.

The GTN agenda is a diverse one. Although God and science is at its heart, there are many associated ideas to explore—as evidenced by the introduction of WOW. Drawing inspiration from the phrase 'fearfully and wonderfully made' in Psalm 134, this new series helps you to appreciate the sheer wonder of who and what we are as human beings. "But WOW has a practical application as well," said

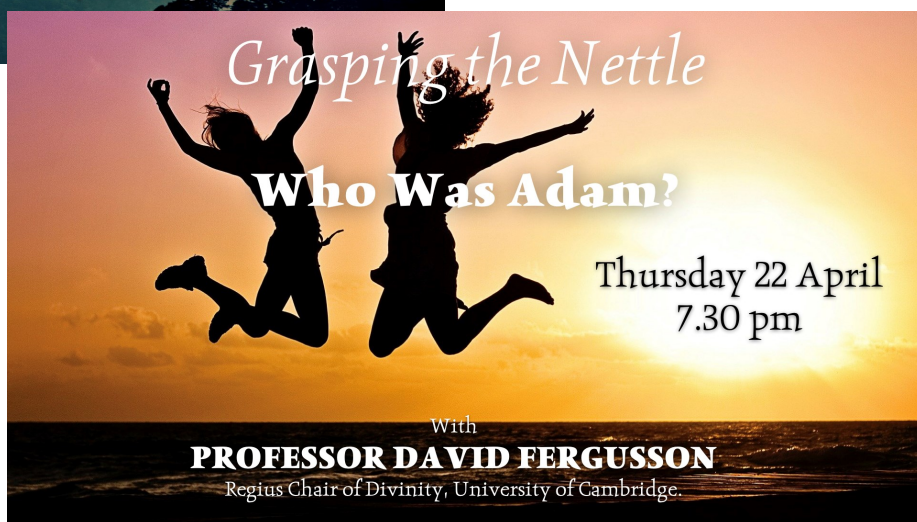
Professor Chris Packard who is helping lead the agenda for this new strand. "Viewers will also learn how to take better care of their bodies and minds. It is the personal equivalent of 'creation care'."

Looking Further Ahead with GTN



“A theology of creation is about much more than understanding Genesis chapters 1 and 2” says Professor Fergusson. “It raises a range of issues including creation care and the question of whether animals have souls!” Find out more on 15th April.

Ultimately explorations of the science and God theme will question ‘who was Adam in the grand scheme of creation?’ The first truly human being or perhaps the first divinely conscious human being? Can Scripture and the evolutionary narrative be held as complementary? Find out more on 22nd April.



Wednesday 12th May 7.30 pm

WOW

Command & Control:
Oxygen, Blood Flow and the Art of Survival
With Professor David Galloway

email office@graspingthenettle.org to register your interest.

By the term ‘Command and Control’ Professor Galloway refers to the chemical processes that maintain life in our bodies—from the control of blood pressure, heart rate, digestion and more—all with beautifully poised balance. And what happens if any part of the system fails? Can we do anything to prevent that happening? This session will illustrate once more how we are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’.

To register for GTN events simply write to office@graspingthenettle.org

Grasping the Nettle in the School Curriculum



An audience of 100 senior pupils in Caldervale High School, Airdrie engaging with The God Question.

Young people in school have shown themselves remarkably enthusiastic about grappling with the big questions about science and God. From school, conferences structured around the specially devised **Introducing the God Question** resources, to the involvement of guest speakers such as Vatican Astronomer Guy Consolmagno, wherever and however the subject is raised, young people engage with it. Now GTN is working with Christian Values in Education (CVE) and the Scottish Catholic Education Service (SCES) to provide

structured input to the school curriculum during lockdown—and beyond. Barbara Coupar, Head of SECS said *“The partnership with GTN is hugely beneficial for schools giving them access to high quality people and resources”*. Her colleague Jo Hughes added, *“We have spent time relating The God Question resources to experiences and outcomes in the Curriculum for Excellence. This means the resources can be integrated with what teachers know needs to be addressed in the classroom”*.

The planning for this important input to the curriculum continues and is not unduly affected by whether pupils are engaged in full-time school attendance, are learning online or participating in blended learning.

Even though **Introducing the God Question** is designed for use in secondary schools, the primary sector has not been left behind. The new ‘for starters’ version is being carefully considered in relation to the primary curriculum and of course the forthcoming animation series *The Story of (Nearly) Everything* is produced with children aged 6-9 in mind.

Barbara Coupar is a member of the GTN Council of Advisers.

Calling All Chaplains

The new For Starters version of The God Question series is being promoted to school chaplains. *“I know from experience the challenges of identifying how best to relate to an audience of young people in a school assembly slot,”* said GTN Liaison Officer Rev George Lind. *“These short well-focussed resources are ideal in those situations. They are also of great value in RE lessons.”* Contact info@kharisproductions.com



Dr Deborah Haarsma presents to pupils at Williamwood High School, Glasgow



Dr Guy Consolmagno at Grove Academy, Dundee



The God Question for Starters—a Teacher Perspective

By Jo Hughes

This is an excellent resource to aid comprehensive and effective delivery of both the RERC and RME curricula, supporting the study of the interaction between science and religious belief. Using a series of short video clips, it stimulates discussion and further study around the major religious, scientific and philosophical questions surrounding the origins of the universe, evolution, the nature of God, and human consciousness.

The video clips have been broken down into easily useable sections. They form a high-quality resource, both in terms of the production values and in the quality of the content, featuring many of the foremost thinkers in this area, and covering both a depth and a breadth of views. They are supported by study guides and teacher notes, making them ideal in terms of the flexibility demanded by current educational practice, and allowing teachers the



confidence to know that issues are covered in a full, balanced, and authentic way. They can be used for individual or group study, or for project and research tasks, motivating and encouraging pupils to deepen their learning.



Jo Hughes is Adviser in Religious Education at the Scottish Catholic Education Service

The Message Refreshed and Relunched

The Exploring the God Question series has been a core resource for GTN from the outset bringing expert scientists and philosophers together from both sides of the theist/atheist divide, the series takes views on three spectacular journeys: exploring the wonders of the cosmos, investigating life on earth and probing the depths of human mind and consciousness.


Now hot off the press is a new electronic brochure which, though designed for international use, is an excellent way of 'spreading the word' from the GTN constituency to the wider Scottish community. Heriot-Watt University Chaplain Alistair Donald described it as *"exceptionally helpful"*.

Request your copy of the brochure by writing to office@graspingthenettle.org

From the Producers of *Against the Tide*


EXPLORING THE GOD QUESTION

Why science points to the mind of a creator



Why is Christianity a more compelling and convincing explanation of our existence than the 'chance' alternative of atheism?

Join world renowned experts including John Lennox, Francis Collins, William Lane Craig, John Polkinghorne and many others exploring the subject of science and God.



Take three fascinating journeys in just six half-hour programmes to discover the breathtaking wonders of the *Cosmos, Life on Earth and Human Mind & Brain.*

SCRIPTURE, SCIENCE AND THE GOD QUESTION



Exploring the Theme of Creation in the Bible

But What About Genesis?

“Sooner or later, any thinking Christian encountering the wonders of science as they explore the God question is going to ask ‘but what about Genesis?’” said Professor John Spence, Chairman of Search for Truth Charitable Trust. *“That is why we commissioned this resource.”*

Scripture, Science and The God Question is a series of 8 Bible Engagements set against the background of science—and also other relevant academic disciplines including history.

Nevertheless, *“Scripture is front and centre in this production,”* said one of its chief contributors, Rev Dr Fergus Macdonald. *“For that reason we have two approaches to each Engagement: both personal meditation on the passage and study of it.”*

Presently the studies are being piloted under the leadership of Rev Ross Blackman. The sessions have drawn the interest of a varied group comprising theologians, scientifically literate individuals and, most important of all,

folk from the pews intent on finding out more about passages of Scripture that stretch the most erudite minds. *“One of the most impressive outcomes of the pilot study,”* said Ross Blackman, *“is the richness of the conversation emerging from the meditation. If engagement with Scripture is the aim then here is the evidence that it is taking place.”* The unifying theme in the studies is ‘creation’. *“The theme runs from Genesis to Revelation, where we find a new heaven and a new earth,”* commented Fergus Macdonald.

“In between we focus on the God of creation in Isaiah 40, Jesus the co-creator in John 1, Jesus the second Adam of 1 Corinthians 15 and God’s new creation in 2 Corinthians 5.”

Although the publication is not yet officially released, if you would like to be part of a pilot study or wish more information please contact office@graspingthenettle.org



Finding stillness within yourself is key to meditating on Scripture

Welcome Moderation for GTN

Photo credit: Roger Harris, Wikipedia



Lord James Wallace

From the beginning, GTN has benefitted immensely from full and practical support of a succession of Moderators of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Moderator Designate, **Lord James Wallace** of Tankerness, promises to be no exception. New to GTN, Lord Wallace said *“I find GTN very exciting. I am not just interested in it but enthused by what I have read and heard. I look forward to a very fruitful and productive relationship with you”*.

As Moderator in the year that GTN was established, **Very Rev Dr John Chalmers** was its first Chairman. He presently serves as GTN’s Ambassador at Large and is widely credited with being foundational to the success of GTN’s swift early development.

His successor was **Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison**, who presently serves as GTN’s Chairman. Both as Moderator and as Chairman, his involvement in GTN has been pivotal in leading the further development of the initiative.



Very Rev Dr John Chalmers

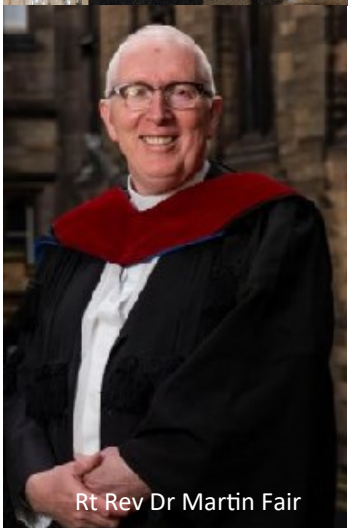


Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison

Welcome support continued from the Moderator’s office during the tenures of the **Very Reverends Dr Russell Barr, Susan Brown and Colin Sinclair**. GTN is immensely grateful to all of them.

The current Moderator, **Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair**, is a founding member of GTN, an unstinting supporter of it and a highly engaged leader in GTN online. His ongoing contributions to GTN are invaluable.

Although Grasping the Nettle is interdenominational—a crucially important characteristic—GTN is hugely appreciative of the encouragement and practical support of all who, during GTN’s lifetime, have held the office of Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.



Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair

Two New Board Members for GTN

GTN is delighted to welcome two new members to its Steering Board. **Rev Adam Oellermann** (left) serves in a recently planted, and growing, Baptist Church in Girvan and will represent the Baptist Union of Scotland. Anglican Priest **Fr Gerry Dillon** (right) brings a wealth of educational experience and is Priest in Charge at St Luke’s Episcopal Church, Glenrothes.



Spread the News About GTN

Grasping the Nettle

**GTN FIVE YEARS ON:
LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD**



Introduction

The date: 5 June 2014. The scene: the currently named Glasgow Hilton Doubletree Hotel. One hundred and eighty dinner guests gather for an event named (without too much forethought) 'Grasping the Nettle'. The key question was: Are science and religion at war?

The principal dinner guest was Prof John Lennox of the University of Oxford.

VIPs included Rt Rev John Chalmers, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; His Grace the Most Rev Philip Tartaglia, Archbishop of Glasgow; Rev Dr Martin Fair, Convener of "Why Believe?"; Dr Lars Dahle of NLA University, Norway; NASA astronaut Lt Jim Dutton.

Leaders from different denominations fellowshiping over dinner and discussing key challenges to Christian faith.

Professor John Lennox

Just two days later the Glasgow Clyde Auditorium (the Armadillo) housed an audience of 2,500 people gathered for *In Concert with the Cosmos* - an evening with the Springfield Cambridge Festival Chorus and Orchestra, the Craigholme School Choir, Tenors Unlimited, Jim Dutton and John Lennox.

Above: A galaxy of singing and speaking talent assembles for *In Concert with the Cosmos*

Two very contrasting high profile approaches to exploring a single theme: that of science and God. The theme was embodied in music, in film excerpts and interviews. The seeds of *Grasping the Nettle* - Scotland's unique interdenominational initiative on science and God - had truly been sown.

Formally constituted in 2015, GTN celebrated its 5th anniversary in 2020. The electronic publication "*GTN Five Years On*" was produced not only to mark its development but also to outline its plans for an expanding agenda.

However the extent of GTN's impact, in encouraging the Church across Scotland to understand more clearly the evidence-based nature of Christianity, is dependent on supporters across the country spreading the word and promoting engagement with GTN's agenda.

One straight-forward way to do that is by forwarding *GTN Five Years On* (front page opposite) to your church leadership, members and others whom you know might benefit.

Don't forget GTN, via Introducing the God Question and the new The God Question for Starters, has an important part to play in secondary school curriculum. Please inform any teachers/Chaplains you know.

Request your copy of GTN Five Years On from office@graspingthenettle.org and pass it on.

Obituary: Rev Dr Sir John Polkinghorne

It was with great sadness that the Christian and academic communities learned of the passing of Rev Dr Sir John Polkinghorne, one of the most influential figures ever to grace the field of science and religion.



Sir John Polkinghorne being interviewed for The God Question series

Having reached the pinnacle of his career as Professor of Mathematical Physics in the University of Cambridge he was also President of Queens' College at the University until his retirement.

A fellow of the Royal Society, in 1979 he effected a career change, training for the Anglican ministry, commenting that "Christianity has always been central to my life". His twin perspectives—science and theology—led to the publication of works of great distinction and value to any seeking to understand how the relationship between the two can be mutually enriching. "*Sir John Polkinghorne was one of the most outstanding Christian apologists of our time and we were thrilled to have the opportunity to interview him for The God Question series*" said Producer Iain Morris. "*The series is just one of many ways in which we hope his legacy will continue to be impactful.*"

Zoom: Get Used To It!

GTN Council of Advisers Member Dr Murdo Macdonald reflects on technology that is here to stay.

The past year has changed many aspects of our lives: our social interactions, worship opportunities, work engagements - and so much more - all turned upside down by a tiny virus.

As we look towards exiting lockdown, and seek a way forward to something resembling a new normal, many of us are reflecting on what might change. While we may return to doing many things “the old way”, it is likely that we will also find new (or at least modified) ways of doing many of the things that we did previously.

The Church of Scotland’s Society, Religion and Technology (SRT) project has for over 50 years sought to help the church to engage with ethical issues in science and technology. As the areas covered by the SRT intersects with the education curriculum, part of our work involves engaging with students in schools, colleges and universities. Previously, of course, that engagement would have taken place face to face, physically travelling to different parts of the country, in order to go to the school classroom. Pandemic restrictions, and the widespread use of remote learning platforms such as Zoom, means that over the past year these interactions have been done online. It is likely that this way of working will persist, and that there will be opportunities in the future to engage with students in this way.

Of course, we are all painfully aware of the drawbacks and limitations of online interactions: home-schooled kids zoom bombing meetings, the cry of “you’re on mute!” and the inability to get the “share screen” function to work at a crucial moment are all scenarios which are now familiar to most of us.

When we seek to use online platforms, and familiarise ourselves (as far as possible) with all the limitations of each of the different programmes, even with the best preparation, we have to accept that we will find things falling flat on their face at times!

We look forward to seeing you soon, via Zoom, with GTN Online!

Financial Support of GTN

It’s simply not true that there is no such thing as a free lunch. For thousands of ‘consumers’ of GTN, many of its benefits are free of charge. However its resources are highly subsidised and overall the initiative has significant costs. If you would be willing to support the GTN initiative, either with a one-off donation or ongoing financial support please visit

www.graspingthenettle.org/donate

Grasping the Nettle is administered by Search for Truth Charitable Trust, a registered Scotland-based Charity.



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?’

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.