

# WHERE HEAVEN AND EARTH MEET

A JESUS-CENTRED SPIRITUALITY  
FOR TODAY



N.T. WRIGHT  
— ONLINE —  
RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

## Missing God

The novelist Julian Barnes wrote a book about death a number of years ago, and he began with a very haunting line. 'I don't believe in God, but I miss him', Barnes wrote. I remember somebody asked another novelist from a previous generation, Kingsley Amis, whether he believed in God, to which he responded, 'No I don't, and I hate him'. I see these opposing sentiments as a sign of our times. We've been through the angry secularist rejection. Maybe the God who people 'don't believe in' in the early years of the 21st century is waiting in the wings. People sense an absence, maybe think there ought to be something there, some ancient sense of connectedness one might actually want to retrieve.

Another example from within my own family. One of my daughters brought some friends to stay with us and made it very clear to me beforehand that these three young women were not Christians and didn't expect to have Christianity talked at them, even if they were staying with a Bishop. I made myself scarce for that weekend.

It happened, that Saturday, to be pouring rain, and with little else to do, my daughter and her friends visited the Durham Cathedral, if only for want of dry alternatives. The choir happened to be practising for evensong when they entered this extraordinary building, with all its history and memory, with this amazing music coming from the far end. Suddenly, one of these three young women burst into tears, sobbing and sobbing and had no idea why. What did it mean? What was going on? Why did she feel like that? The girls spent their whole weekend pondering and probing and trying to identify what they were feeling. Whenever I've told that story, people have responded in kind with their own stories of similar mysterious encounters, not knowing quite why, but sensing strongly that something more than their immediate environment was afoot.

People are aware that life can suddenly be multidimensional, that sometimes a veil seems to be drawn back and we glimpse that there is much more going on in this world. There's more to life than merely the materialism of money and power and all the rest. People do glimpse that. They are aware of it. But too often the moment passes, they go

back out on the street, and, as C.S. Lewis writes in *Screwtape Letters*, all you have to do to divert somebody who may be thinking about the possibility of God is to show them somebody selling a newspaper for them to think, 'Oh yes, this is real life and all that God stuff is just a fantasy'. Well, is it?

## Worldviews

To see this other dimension and really hold onto it is to inhabit a whole worldview – a spiritual worldview – and to resist another kind of worldview – the common worldview of Western society, since the Enlightenment at least.

What is a worldview? For me, the study of worldviews is a way of getting right into the heart of what it means (or meant) to live in a particular time and place. It's a big idea, but it's a way of making sure we are paying attention to all sorts of aspects of a culture, of life, who we are, of who people in other places and times were. What they did and why it made sense for them. By 'worldviews' I *do not* mean the set of carefully laid out beliefs often labelled a 'Christian worldview' or a 'Buddhist worldview' or what have you. I mean the phrase in its much more fundamental sense.

Worldviews, as people often say, are like eyeglasses. They're what you look through, not what you look at. And with eyeglasses, the longer you wear them, the more they become a part of you, the less you notice them. I recently had a problem with my glasses where something was slightly misaligned. I had to take them to an optician and have them adjusted so that I could see through them without stopping to think about the spectacles themselves. This analogy isn't perfect, but here's the point. While I had the glasses off, I couldn't see very well to walk around, let alone fix them. I needed help.

That often happens when people have a clash of worldviews. Something suddenly disorientates them, and they have to examine their assumptions and the stories they tell themselves. That can be a very distressing as well as disorientating procedure. Sometimes people see a movie or read a book and say their whole world has been turned upside down, as though they came out not quite knowing who they were anymore.

Of course, no tool of analysis is foolproof, but it's a way of going beyond superficial analyses that claim the only significant content is what people say they believe or their obvious and visible actions. Underneath and behind that there's always a set of assumptions which people hold about life, the world, themselves.

What I'm proposing through the idea of worldviews corresponds to what some sociologists have done. Charles Taylor, for example, wrote a huge book called *The Secular Age*. In it, he writes about the 'social imaginary', which is an evocative term indicating that all societies have a world which they imagine they're living in. That imaginary is something that, again like eyeglasses, people look through rather than look at. It is very much like the answer given to a child who goes on asking 'Why?' over and over again, until you eventually get to, 'That's just the way the world is'. But that 'way the world is' might be very different depending on one's worldview. It may leave you open to glimpsing that mysterious something, as my daughter's friend did in Durham Cathedral, or it may prematurely foreclose on that possibility.

I once read a piece by a leading journalist in the UK, who happens to be an atheist, about attending a special children's carol service for Christmas. He wrote, 'Even though I knew it [Christmas] was a lie, I still felt a prickling sensation at the back of my neck. I still felt that this had a power and a beauty even though I knew it didn't mean anything'. Now of course, I want to say, the reason he felt that was because it actually did mean something, and he was, subconsciously maybe, pushing against a reality which is really there. That is a feeling I think that many people in our present moment actually are experiencing quite often.

That feeling juts up against the other pervasive sense in modern culture, that perhaps people used to believe in that religion stuff once, but now we know it's all been disproved. It's all bad for you and so on. Science has ruled God out of the question, etc. etc.

And yet...

There is this thing called spirituality, which is a vague word. That's part of its usefulness, actually. In today's confused climate we can't be too precise. People aren't really sure what it is that there might be. Even the most believing person can't be *entirely* sure of the totality of that deeper reality.

Today, so many people claim to want spirituality without 'religion'. They crave a sense of otherness, but without the baggage of Christian history or the Church or, indeed, community. So we often hear the phrase, 'I am deeply spiritual, but of course I'm not religious'. The religion thing is old fashioned, out of date. What sort of spirituality can people then go for?

## A Brief History

The major change that has happened in our society over the last few centuries, which is mapped by Taylor in *A Secular Age*, is that before the 17th and 18th century, people assumed that what we now call 'spiritual experience' was part of the rest of everyday life. It went with everything else. Over the past centuries, spiritual experience has been pushed off to one side, as though it's a form of private life having nothing to do with the public world.

It was so much the case in Stalin's Soviet Union, which many see as the height of secularism, that religion was associated with mental illness and criminal behaviour. Such extremes are rare now, but I see a subtle version of this uncomfortability with religion still. In polite society, if you suddenly say something to reveal that you believe in God and Jesus and the meaning they have in your life, *either* people change the subject rather quickly, look away, roll their eyes; *or* it may happen the other way that people all around begin sharing their own experience of dreams or the desire to pray, etc. Embrace or rejection, both of these responses show how deeply ingrained this sensibility – that the topic of spirituality should be awkward or embarrassing – really has become.

We have to remind ourselves that the modern puzzles about spirituality are not simply the result, as some will say, of capital 'S' Science disproving all that, so we can't believe



it anymore. It's much deeper than that. Indeed, many scientists, when you ask, admit to a deep spirituality. We still feel this prickly sense, under certain circumstances, that something's going on.

What has happened in the Western philosophical world is that increasingly heaven and earth have been pulled apart from one another. Enlightenment popular culture seized on scientific discoveries about how the Earth works to show that, clearly, nothing can be the result of divine intervention. In other words, you start with a wrong idea of how heaven and earth might work (namely, that God reaches in, does things, then goes away again), and demonstrate that we can't see that process empirically, therefore God can't be involved at all. If you begin with a false picture, then disprove that image, it's all too easy to imagine you've disproved the real one.

Many people today are familiar with the idea that we live in a secular world, that is to say, a world in which God seems to be absent. Many people walking around our streets doing all the sorts of things that people do in the Western world live as though there was no God. Taylor argues in *A Secular Age* that this is the first time in history when that's been a major feature of the landscape. There have always been some people in every culture who've been sceptical of the gods and lived as if they didn't exist. But it's fairly new that this worldview has dominated an entire culture.

One of the major intellectual forces in the 18th and 19th centuries, and still very influential to our day, is a revival of the ancient philosophy known as Epicureanism. What is Epicureanism and how did it come into our culture in this way? Epicurus, himself, one of the great ancient Greek philosophers, lived from 341 to 270 B.C. His philosophy was then taught and disseminated, but it always remained quite an elite, quite a niche sort of thing.

The popular philosophy in the wider world of Jesus and Paul's day was some variety of stoicism, which is quite different from Epicureanism. Very broadly speaking, for Epicureanism, if there are gods, they're a long way away and they don't bother about our world, they don't intervene in our world. Our world just does its own thing under its own steam. Whereas for stoics, the world, including the divine, is all part of one single

continuum, so that the gods or God are part of the world and the world is part of God. Likewise for the Platonists, followers of Plato, God and the world were different, but related. They believed there were signs of God's work in the world and that humans had these things called souls, which had a natural affinity with God's world, creating a bridge between this world and the other world. All these philosophies have been enormously influential. Some Christians, when they hear that description of Platonism, assume that's basically Christian doctrine, even though there are significant differences between Plato's philosophy and Christianity.

The reason that Epicureanism began gaining popularity in the time of Jesus was because of a Latin poet called Lucretius, who argued the case for the Epicurean vision with great poetic insight and wisdom, stressing that it's impossible to believe that the holy abode of the gods exists in any part of our world. The point, for Epicurus and Lucretius, was to get God out of the picture. They were faced with a pagan world in which it was thought that gods were constantly intervening. When things went wrong, it had to be because some god had it in for you, or because you didn't offer the right sacrifice. Epicurus rejected all that, saying if there are gods, they're a long way away. They are very happy. Mostly, they're very happy because they don't have anything to do with us and our messy lives.

Why do things happen then? For Epicurus, the world is composed of atoms which are constantly in flux, causing essentially random events to intermingle. (We think Niels Bohr discovered atomic theory, but philosophers have been theorising the existence of something like atoms for millennia.) Atoms are constantly on the move, and sometimes they swerve inexplicably, bump into each other, and create new life forms. This process, assuming the gods are out of the picture, was a great liberation for Epicurus.

The next step is to ponder what happens to us at death. Epicureanism gets rid of all that old pagan nonsense about there being a strange future after death in which maybe the righteous will be rewarded, and the unrighteous will be punished. At death, our atoms simply dissolve so that there is, in both senses, nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to be afraid of in the sense of no vindictive demons grinning, waiting to get their

hands on us for all the wicked things we've done. But also, more darkly, a sense of nothingness going into total dissolution.

That Epicurean assumption dissipated, but was revived in force during the Enlightenment. If there is a God then he or she or it is a long way away and normally inaccessible. Spiritual life and the sacred and the sense of God was pushed away either to a distant heaven or into a strictly private zone. What has filled the void has partly been the aesthetic awareness of beauty. The sublime has replaced the sacred so that we're a bit worried about the sacred. The Enlightenment era saw a huge upswing in this wonderful thing called Art. We put it in museums and created amazing music that gives a sense of something beyond ourselves. Many people in the 19th and 20th century writing about art and music have used the sort of language for great art and music which people in former days might have used for religious experience. Of course, in former days, great art and great music was most often to be found in churches. The fact that we now do it more and more in concert halls or museums maps a certain transition within the culture we're still struggling to come to terms with.

We still live in the long shadow of those great Enlightenment thinkers who, for myriad political and economic and social reasons, strongly promoted the Epicurean vision. So, we assume if there is such a thing as spiritual experience, it is a disorienting and confusing connection with this distant reality. People struggle to make sense of some kind of spirituality within worldviews that make it very difficult to put the package back together and make anything sensible out of it.

## Allure of Progress

Part of this same Enlightenment project is the idea of progress. It is of course common to hear, especially in response to talk of Christian faith, appeals to 'the modern age' or to 'this day and age'. Surely nobody could believe such and such 'in this day and age'. Surely 'the modern age' has progressed beyond such and such an attitude. This appeal to an implicit narrative of steady progress is in fact a regular way of shutting off other lines of thought, insisting instead on one particular drift which we're all supposed to be signed up to.



Much of the modern Western worldview, because of Epicureanism (and later Hegel), assumes that we live in a story of steady progress. We look back to the 16th century Reformation, or to the 18th century Enlightenment and we find that the Western world regularly tells its story now as the story of wave upon wave of progress. We've been getting better. We've developed technologies. We've learned more things. Of course, we can do amazing things now that weren't possible in the past. We put a man on the moon. We have the Internet and health care and air conditioning. However, life is actually much more contested, difficult, and dangerous than that.

Such a stance allows us to look back on former ages as the unenlightened ones. This is particularly a feature that comes to us from the 18th century, when some philosophers spoke explicitly of their own knowledge to cast their predecessors as foolish, even immoral. You only have to think back from our vantage to the 16th and 17th century and people like Shakespeare to realise that, actually, they knew quite a lot as well.

Conversely, it doesn't take much reflection on recent history to realise that it's not all been a smooth progress upwards into the light. We can think of the guillotine and the French Revolution. We can think of the Gulag and the Russian revolution. We can of course point to the Holocaust and Hiroshima and the long, world-upending consequences of World War II in the last century. We needn't go back very far indeed, if we think of the wars and calamities and public crises that have gone on at the beginning of this century.

Has this Enlightenment really done what it was supposed to do? Are we so sure that it's been a smooth steady tale of progress? I think not. Not everyone, especially not in the academic world, really tells the story of the Enlightenment that way, but so much of our world at a popular level still lives assuming that progress narrative. Many churches, too, have signed up to that myth of Western progress, sometimes using it to bolster their own claims on society.

Outside of the churches, the idea that a new light had come (en-light-enment) persisted and persists. A light which capital 'P' Progress would provide, no need for the divine. Immanuel Kant said this is 'humankind come of age'. We're no longer children, and thus

no longer need that heavenly parent stooping over us like. We can make advancements in our own way, as we've done. The problem, however, was that many people thought that what was happening in terms of our understanding of the natural world, science, meant that we were then advancing in all other ways as well, including morally, religiously.

It's not too difficult, in fact, to read this sentiment back onto Jesus if one wanted, as some have done, so that maybe what he was actually going on about was a prophecy of a new wave of liberty, of humans finding their own way in the world and making their own world better. There are some in our own day who are saying this exactly, framing the interpretation to say that the world is getting better and better and we just need to get rid of all that silly religion stuff, and then it'll be as good as it could possibly be.

And yet...

We return to where we started and see this young woman who weeps in a cathedral without knowing why. See this novelist who says, 'I don't believe in God, but I miss him'. The journalist who feels the prickling of power and beauty at his neck. What's going on?

Here's the puzzle. It is assumed that official, boring, old Christianity doesn't really have anything to do with these senses of mystery, of spirituality, of the world of the imagination. Perhaps because people remember Sunday school as fussy teachers telling you how to think, what to believe, lots of things you're supposed to do and not do, and unless you get all this right, you may not go to heaven. People reject all that as something to be grown out of. The rest of Christianity hasn't been much better at expressing what it has to offer in terms of responding to this wistfulness, this sense of yearning. There is a sense of possibility, but people do not expect to find that hope met in Christianity, in Jesus, or in the Bible.

When read with fresh eyes, the Bible reminds us life's really not like the Epicurean vision. There is this complete integration of the God who made the world, the God who is shining light into the world, the God who many people had rejected because they were afraid of the light showing up the sort of people they were – this God has come

into that world as a human being in order through that to bring about the possibility of New Creation. History is sliced through with this alternative narrative about Jesus and his alternative Kingdom. A Kingdom which tells a story that isn't about linear progress, but actually about New Creation bursting in upon an unready and unexpected world in ways that the world finds uncomfortable. That's the reality which answers to those longing.

## Scripture's Response

When we turn to the Bible, we get a hint at the kind of worldview that more readily interfaces with those mysterious longings for something more, and is able to find concrete answers. John's Gospel in particular brings into focus the ancient Israelite belief that humans are made to stand at the threshold between heaven and earth. That is an extraordinary idea which many people today find it hard to get their minds around. Partly this is to do with the misguided conception of heaven as this totally other 'place', which we can't possibly have anything to do with, which creates this great chasm.

That is simply not how the whole Bible sees things. The cosmos, the whole creation, is indeed bipartite, with God's heaven 'space' (our spatial metaphors break down here, relying as they do on corporeality, mutual exclusivity) and humans' earth space. Rather than being mutually inaccessible, these two spaces are made for one another. They are made to overlap. They are made to interlock. They belong together. The intention, all the way from Genesis to Revelation, is for humans to stand in the middle, living on both levels at once, difficult and dangerous as it may be.

The ancient Israelites had ways of inscribing this intention in their daily lives through practice and symbols. Probably the most important feature of the culture for this purpose was the Temple in Jerusalem. More than just a big religious building, the temple is the place where heaven and earth meet, where God promised to meet with Gods' people. This is why the temple is where you would go for the great festivals reaffirming the national narratives, and in anticipation of God doing again what had been done in the past. We may have specific churches where we think that, in a sense,

something uniquely spiritual goes on, and I've been in those spaces, but this is nothing like the robust, worldview-defining conception of the Temple for the Jews of Jesus's day.

Another key reinforcing feature was the Sabbath, which keeps the seventh day of the week as a special day, without work, dedicated for God. The Sabbath functioned in terms of time just as the Temple did in terms of space. If the Temple is the place where heaven and earth met, then to stand in the Temple wasn't *as if* you were in heaven. You actually were in heaven. This was where the interlocking spheres came together. In the same way, the Sabbath was, and still is to many, the time when somehow our time and God's time overlap. The quality of time changes.

Us moderns haven't grown up with that 500 plus year story, and the symbols to reinforce it. But this may be another of those mysterious experiences that those of us distanced from that sort of tradition suddenly glimpse. Maybe listening to a piece of music or during a sublime moment in the forest, the sense of time feels different from what we normally perceive.

## Jesus at the Intersection

What would it look like to retrieve a spirituality in today's world that derives from the biblical tradition, and not the Enlightenment one? First and foremost, it would have to be faithful to a Jesus who beckons us to come see and come stay in that space of intersection, which he most perfectly embodies. This life at the intersection of heaven and earth is far greater than the occasional wistfulness so many are stuck feeling today.

John's Gospel sets up Jesus as the ultimate example of one who lives at the intersection of heaven and earth, building on the Israel tradition and finding its fulfilment in Jesus. Jesus offers a radically different picture of what it means to be human than that which most modern Westerners have in their imaginations. John's sense of the Christian vocation is to be drawn to where Jesus is and to share his calling to stand at the dangerous intersection between heaven and earth. That's where what we call spirituality is supposed to go. When it sneaks up on us unawares, we oughtn't be surprised.

Jesus is constantly offering a new sort of spirituality, not just a wistful longing that maybe there might be something, somewhere, which we feel from time to time. He offers it to Nicodemus, and then again to the woman at the well. He offers a drink of living water which enables a deep, abiding spirituality.

The continuity of Jesus as the fulfilment of the spiritual worldview embodied by Israel is given sophisticated expression in the prologue to John's gospel. 'In the beginning was the Word. The Word was close beside God, and the Word was God. In the beginning, He was close beside God.' This mysterious opening is like the overture to a great piece of music, with darkly strange but beautiful notes coming through. We're left wondering where this is all going, just as we're reminded of the creation story at its metaphoric heart.

John continues. 'All things came into existence through Him. Not one thing that exists came into existence without Him. Life was in Him and this life was the light of the human race. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it'.

John rehearses Genesis in a new register, situating 'the darkness' as a malevolent part of creation which the light, the Word, the one through whom all things were made is somehow holding at bay. Skip ahead to one of the most extraordinary lines in the whole of the New Testament. 'The Word became flesh and lived among us. We gazed upon his glory, glory like that of the father's only son full of grace and truth'. The word translated 'lived' in that verse, perhaps better expressed as 'tabernacled', would have carried direct overtones of the Temple, that place where heaven and earth overlap viscerally. That reality of intersection, now embodied, enfleshed, in the Word, Jesus. The thin places glimpsed when heaven meets earth, all of those mysterious moments, find their life in the person of Jesus.

The prologue goes on to say, 'Nobody has ever seen God. The only begotten God who is intimately close to the Father, he has brought him to light'. Many people, many Christian theologians in fact, start off in their minds with an idea of God. They think they know roughly who God is. And when they hear people talking about Jesus and God in the same breath, they try, as it were, to fit Jesus into the idea of God which they already

have. The trouble with that is that our ideas of God may well be distorted, not least in the Western world by that old Epicurean idea that God was millions of miles away. This theology makes Jesus, if he is God, like an alien coming from an entire other world, who wouldn't be at home in our world at all.

The Gospels, with Genesis as their support, attest that Jesus is utterly at home. In fact, he is the most at home person that there can be in this world. It was made through him. It was made for him. As followers of Jesus sharing in his life, it was made for us as well. Some of us grew up with a kind of Platonic dualism where heaven and earth are really very different, and the aim is to escape from earth and go to heaven instead. But the point we're seeing here is that God created this world in order to be his own home, a heaven and earth reality in which he will be truly at home. Joining, not pulling apart.

## Learning to Think Differently

We have lived with that sense of heaven being a long way away for far too long. We have to learn to think in the way of the Old and New Testament, not because it's an ancient way, but because it's a radical alternative to what else has been on offer the past few hundred years. And because it supplies a more satisfactory answer to those confusing glimpses and longings for a deeper integration of the 'spiritual' and the 'earthly' that people seem to desire.

Heaven and earth are made for one another. Jesus's ascension in Acts 1 demonstrates this as well. We see part of the human world, namely the body of Jesus, exalted to heaven, so that heaven and earth are joined together in him. Then in Acts 2 with Pentecost, we see heaven and earth joined together the other way around. The spirit, which is God's own breath, comes in wind and fire to inhabit Jesus's followers. The dwelling of God with humans.

Just to further prove the point, Acts can be read as a Temple book. It's about the establishment of a new way in which heaven and earth come together. The controversies in Acts are almost all about temples. The Temple in Jerusalem in the first few chapters, and then a reprise of that at the end when Paul is accused of corrupting



the Temple. Even when Paul is out on the road, the question is always, Where does God dwell? Does God have any business to do with Earth? How do we humans fit into that picture?

Do those questions sound familiar? I see in them quite the same questions we all ask when we long for something more than our modern, materialist lives. The same questions lingering for my daughter's friend after her surprising incident at Durham Cathedral.

Paul's answer, as John's, always revolves around Jesus. Indeed, I know some people who have used John 1:1-18 itself as a prayer, quite fruitfully. It's not a bad place to start if you are wondering about fresh ways of praying. Try taking John 1:1-18, perhaps in a translation you don't usually use, and pray it through slowly, meditating on what you hear. Find yourself within the story it is telling. The passage ends, 'No one has ever seen God but the only begotten God who is close to the Father's heart. He has made him known'.

Pray that that will become true for you. As we meditate on that passage, we may get a sense that this is how heaven and earth can come together, at the place where Jesus is. Where is that place, in everyday life? From one point of view, it is every time Jesus's followers get together to invoke his name. It is certainly every time that we read the story of the Gospels. Likewise, when we break bread and pour wine in his name, then these are moments he's promised to be with us. Also, as in Matthew 25, we know that whenever we minister to those who are in need, the sick, the lonely, the friendless, the homeless, the hungry, the helpless, those without clothes, those who were in prison, then when we do it in as much as we do it to the least of these, we do it for him. This is how heaven and earth meet.

## About the Author

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