

*The John Stott London Lecture, 2020:*

## **MAGNETIC: THE OFFER OF CHRIST TO OUR CULTURE**

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### **Introduction – Welcome to my neighbourhood**

- *Not wanted! ....Grumpy Old Men and women (Ecc. 7:10)*
- *Wanted! ....Men and women of Issachar (I Chron. 12:32)*

### **1. Disenchantment? Enchantment? Let's call the whole thing.... 'Diff-enchantment'**

- *Who to have faith in? e.g. Charles Taylor vs Rodney Stark*

*Taylor: disenchantment and the triumph of 'scientism'*

*Stark:*

Nor has Europe become disenchanted... Multitudes of Europeans believe in ghosts, lucky charms, occult healers, wizards, fortune tellers, *huldufolk*, and a huge array of other aspects of that enchanted world that Taylor believes has long since vanished. What Taylor really demonstrates is that from nowhere is one's vision of modern times so distorted as from the confines of the faculty lounge. (Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith*, 186)

*Understanding Unbelief: Across Disciplines and Across Cultures:*

[\[https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/\]](https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/)

*5. Unbelief in God doesn't necessarily entail unbelief in other supernatural phenomena. Atheists and (less so) agnostics exhibit lower levels of supernatural belief than do the wider populations. However, only minorities of atheists or agnostics in each of our countries appear to be thoroughgoing naturalists. (2.2, 2.3)*

*6. Another common supposition – that of the purposeless unbeliever, lacking anything to ascribe ultimate meaning to the universe – also does not bear scrutiny. While atheists and agnostics are disproportionately likely to affirm that the universe is 'ultimately meaningless' in five of our countries, it still remains a minority view among unbelievers in all six countries. (2.4)*

*I believe in energia universal.... It is connected. Nothing happens for causality. It is always a consequence [of something else]. Maybe, it is one of the reasons that Harry always scores in derbies. I believe in that energy. For me, it exists. (Pochettino)*

- Peter Kreeft 'the single most illuminating three sentences I have ever read about our civilization'

There is something which unites magic and applied science [i.e. technology] while separating both from the 'wisdom' of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men; the solution is a technique. (C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 77)

## 2. *Knowing? Not Knowing? Let's call the whole thing.... 'religious'*

- **Interpreting the world through the Word**

*"In your light do we see light" (Ps. 36:9)*

- **The cosmic game of hide-and-seek (Rom. 1: 18-32; Gen. 1-3)**

a) God is not hiding: *"For since the creation of the world..."*

- *Made to Relate* (the image of God: Gen. 1:27)

'Eternal power' = dependence

'Divine nature' = accountability

- *Made to Cultivate* (the cultural mandate: Gen. 1:28)

b) We are hiding: *"Where are you?"* (Gen. 3:9)

- Relational breakdown
- Cultural rebels

c) *Suppression & Repression*

d) *Substitution & Replacement*

Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making *good* things into *ultimate* things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than God. Whatever we build our lives on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry. (Tim Keller, 'How to Talk About Sin in a Postmodern Age')

Idols are to be found at the level of 'ultimates': *Ultimate explanations*; Ultimate authorities; Ultimate commitments; Ultimate loves seen in the lives we live, the homes we make for ourselves, our hopes, fears, and desires, the scripts we follow, the everyday liturgies and rituals than (de-) form us

'The public square is a battleground of the gods' and 'people will always fight for their idols and gods, their objects of worship.' (Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church*, 14, 92)

e) A tragicomedy "No-one stops to think" (Isa. 44:19).

*Idolatry is radical self-harm.* It is also radically, terribly ironic. In trying to be as God, we have ended up less human. The principle affirmed in several places in the Bible that you become like the object of your worship (e.g., Ps. 115:8; Is 41:24; 44:9) is very apparent. If you worship that which is not *God*, you reduce the image of God in yourself. If you worship that which is not even *human*, you reduce your humanity still further. (Chris Wright, *The Mission of God*, 173)

- **The model of messiness (Acts 17: 16-34)**

- a) Paul's attitude: a city submerged
- b) Paul's approach: a 'religious' and 'reaching out' people

It is not beyond possibility that Paul cleverly chose this term precisely for the sake of its ambiguity. His readers would wonder whether the good or bad sense was being stressed by Paul, and Paul would be striking a double blow: people cannot eradicate a religious impulse within themselves (as the Athenians also demonstrate), and yet this good impulse has been degraded by rebellion against the living and true God (as the Athenians also demonstrate). Although people do not acknowledge it they are aware of their relation and accountability to the living and true God who created them. But rather than comes to terms with Him and His wrath against their sin (cf. Rom. 1:18), they pervert the truth. And in this they become ignorant and foolish (Rom. 1:21-22). (Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 254)

- c) Paul's appeal: a call to repentance

- *an encouragement:*

**God's not hiding...** "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." (Jn.1:18)

**He's the best seeker!** "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Lk. 19:10)

### 3. Running to? Running From? Let's call the whole thing.... '*Magnetic Points*'

*If only people could shed their self-awareness, their individuality, their sense of royalty; if only they could simply dissolve into the world around them like plants and animals do, without norms or morals! But they cannot. They are human. They exist with the indescribable greatness as well as the pathetic woefulness that that term covers.* (J.H. Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness*, 279)



#### 1. **Totality: A way to connect?**

**Brief description:** All humans have an innate sense of totality, that they are small cogs in a much bigger machine. They are cosmically interconnected. They are simultaneously small and insignificant but also significant through belonging. They enjoy communal awareness. They crave connection, feel abandoned after they've experienced it and crave for it again and again.

#### 2. **Norm: A way to live?**

**Brief description:** A vague sense there are rules to be obeyed. People know and accept that there are moral standards and codes which come from outside them but to which they must adhere. There is an appreciation of transcendent norms of behaviour which apply to all people and which are cosmically ordered. This brings with it a sense of responsibility to live up to those norms

### 3. Deliverance: A way out?

**Brief description:** That there is something not quite right with the world is a common and little disputed notion. There is finitude, brokenness and wrong-doing in the world and the problem of suffering consistently confronts us. We mourn for a 'paradise lost' and long for deliverance from these evils, craving redemption.



### 4. Destiny: A way we control?

**Brief description:** Although humans know themselves to be active players in the world, there is a nagging feeling that they are also passive participants in somebody else's world.



### 5. Higher Power: A way above? A way beneath?

**Brief description:** People everywhere perceive that behind all realities stands a greater reality. This greater reality is variously conceived but is always a superior power.



## 4. Appealing? Appalling? Let's call the whole thing.... '*Elenctics*'

*...how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,... (1 Thess. 1:9)*

- the Gospel as subversion and the Gospel as fulfilment
- The Gospel as 'subversive fulfilment'
- Our hope is not in a 'what' but a 'who': *We offer people Jesus*

*Elenctics*: the science which unmask sin against God and calls people to a knowledge of the only true God.

- *Personal*: Where are you? What have you done with me? Who do you say that I am?
- *Plea*: a biblical mandate from Genesis to Revelation.
- *Pastoral*: A 'living' approach and a 'loving' approach.
- *Pneumatological*: The Holy Spirit's job (Jn. 16:8).

The very concept of '*elenctics*' is out of accord with the diffident, tolerant mood of today. But no Christian who accepts the biblical view of the evil of idolatry on the one hand and the finality of Jesus Christ on the other can escape it. Further, only those who see the need for *elenctics* can also see the need for dialogue and can understand its proper place. (Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 107)

- 1. ENTERING: *Stepping into the world and listening to the story:*** “For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship...” (v. 23)
- 2. EXPLORING: *Searching for elements of grace and the idols attached to them:*** “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” (v.23)
- 3. EXPOSING: *Showing up the idols as destructive frauds:*** – “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.” (v.29)
- 4. EVANGELIZING: *Showing off the gospel of Jesus Christ as ‘subversive fulfilment:’*** – “So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship - and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” (v. 23)

*The gospel of Christ addresses people and rips open their religiousness consciousness. People want to suppress and push away the gospel in the worst way, just as they have repeatedly done with God. But it can happen that God causes their heart to submit. Then all the engines of resistance are switched off and people listen. Then the King of Glory makes his entrance, the everlasting doors of the understanding are thrown open. And this is what we call the new birth. (Bavinck, Religious Consciousness, 291)*

### 1. Jesus Christ: The way we connect



**Jesus says:** “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (Jn. 15:5)

**Gospel confrontation and connection:**

**Kingdom characteristics:** connectedness and accountability; communion and community

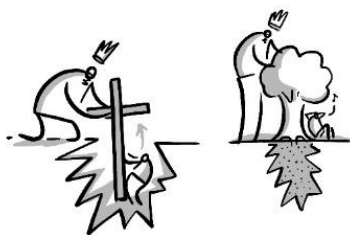


### 2. Jesus Christ: The way we live

**Jesus says:** “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Mt: 5:17)

**Gospel confrontation and connection:**

**Kingdom characteristics:** standard and saviour; not ‘I obey so I’m accepted’ but ‘I’m accepted so I obey’



### 3. Jesus Christ: The way out

**Jesus says:** I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; they will live (Jn. 11:25)

**Gospel confrontation and connection:**

**Kingdom characteristics:** Stress root (our enmity with God) and fruit (our enmity with each other and with creation); a rescue from the outside; Grace (done) vs works (do)

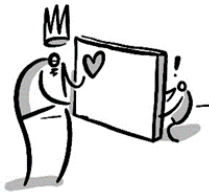


#### 4. Jesus Christ: A way of control

**Jesus says:** "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (Jn.10:11)

**Gospel confrontation and connection:**

**Kingdom characteristics:** a sovereign plan and human responsibility; relationship of a parent and a child.



#### 5. Jesus Christ: The way, the truth and the life

**Jesus says:** "I am the way the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father accept through me" (John 14:6).

**Gospel confrontation and connection:**

**Kingdom characteristics:** a personal absolute, absolute personality; a God who isn't out of reach but who reaches down; a servant King, the Word made flesh.

### Conclusion

'Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.' 1 John 5:21

It is only when I begin to understand a people, only after I have recognized in them my own ineradicable inclination to play a game with God that I can begin... I must feel a community or a fellowship with this person; I must know myself to be one with them. As long as I laugh at their foolish superstition, I look down upon them, I have not yet found the key to their soul. As soon as I understand that what they do in a noticeably naive naïve and childish manner, I also do and continue to do again and again, although in a different form; as soon as I actually stand next to them, I can in the name of Christ stand in opposition to them and convince them of sin, as Christ did with me and still does each day. (Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 243).

ed. John Bolt, *The J.H. Bavinck Reader* (Eerdmans 2013)

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**Daniel Strange, *Plugged in: Connecting your faith with what you watch, read and play* (The Good Book Company, 2019)**

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