Society for the Study of Christian Ethics

Annual Conference: Decline and Christian Ethics

York St John University: 5-7 September 2024

Thursday 5 September	
13:30—15:00	Arrivals and registration for residential delegates – *St John Central* accommodations, Carmelite Street, York (YO1 7AE). This is a 10-15 min. walk from De Grey Court on the Lord Mayor's Walk campus.
14:00—15:30	Postgraduate Forum – *De Grey 123*, Lord Mayor's Walk campus, York St John University (YO31 7EX)
15:30—16:00	Arrivals and registration for non-residential delegates – *De Grey 125*, Lord Mayor's Walk campus, York St John University (YO31 7EX). Late arrivals and Postgraduate Forum delegates may leave their luggage at De Grey 127.
15:30—16:00	Refreshments – *De Grey 125*
16:00—16:15	Welcome and introduction to the conference – *De Grey 125* Professor Neil Messer (President, SSCE)
16:15—17:45	Plenary Session 1: The Decline of the Human? Identity, Agency, and Justice in an Age of Emerging Neurotechnologies (Presidential Address) – *De Grey 125* Speaker: Professor Neil Messer (Baylor University) Respondent: Richard Davis Chair: Robert Song
17:50—18:10	Evening Prayer led by Stephen Goundrey-Smith – *Chapel*
18:15—19:15	Dinner – *Holgate Dining Room Extension*
19:30—20:30	Panel Session: SSCE and Climate Change (SSCE Climate Responsibility Working Group) – *De Grey 125* Chair: Revd Dr Hannah Malcolm Panellists: Richard Davis and Chi-Tsai Huang (Paddy)
20:30—	Social Time - *The bar will not be open; De Grey entry area seating available* *Off campus: Eagle & Child or other local pubs*
Friday 6 September	
07:30—08:45	Breakfast – *Holgate Dining Room*

08:30—08:50	Morning Prayer led by Jane Speck (Chaplain, York St John University) – *Chapel*
09:00—10:30	Plenary Session 2: Crisis and Solidarity: Theology and Religious Studies in Britain – *De Grey 125* Speaker: Professor Nicholas Adams (University of Birmingham) Respondent: Pauline C.H. Kollontai Chair: Anthony Reddie
10:30—10:50	Refreshments – *De Grey 125*

10:50—12:30	Short Paper Session 1
	
	Track 1 (Chair: Samuel Tranter) – *De Grey 123*
	
	    a. Christy Wang: Capitalising on Spiritual Decline: Moral Policing as Profiteering in the Post-Revolutionary England
	
	    b. Victoria Phillips and Katie Hsu: The Decline of the Christian Female Missionary Memoir: Nineteenth-Century International Christian Educational Outreach and the Rise of Secularized Twentieth-Century Isolationism in the United States
	
	    c. Stephen Goundrey-Smith: Anglican Bioethics in the Twentieth Century: Difference or Decline?
	
	Track 2 (Chair: Sean Doherty) – *De Grey 119*
	
	    d. John Huggins: The Role of Hope in the Midst of Fear to Motivate Care and Action Regarding the Climate Crisis: Preliminary Results from Qualitative Research Amongst Christians in the Diocese of Canterbury
	
	    e. Susan Cross: Blaming the Faithful and Shaming the Clergy: Institutional Responses to Decline in the Church of England
	
	Track 3 (Chair: Rachel Muers) – *De Grey 125*
	
	    f. Quan Li (Luke): Divine Transcendence and the Decline of Revolutionary Heroism
	
	    g. Jackie Turvey Tait: For the Years the Locusts Have Eaten: A Liberation Ethics Perspective on Pandemic Vulnerability and Exclusion
	    h. Joel Pierce: On Revelations: Loving a World Full of Failure

12:30—13:30	Lunch – *Holgate Dining Room Extension*
13:30—15:00	Free time. *Please contact Medi Volpe (mav49@cam.ac.uk) if you wish to join a group for the Van Gogh Immersive Experience at York St Mary's at 13:00 for £8 per person.*
15:00—16:30	Annual General Meeting – *De Grey 125*
16:30—17:00	Refreshments – *De Grey 125*
17:00—18:30	Plenary Session 3: Make the Church Great Again: Black Womanist Christian Ethics and the Paradox of Decline – *De Grey 125*

	Speaker: Dr Eboni Marshall Turman (Yale Divinity School) Respondent: Jennifer Moberly Chair: Esther McIntosh
18:30—18:50	Evening Prayer – *Chapel*
19:00—19:30	Drinks/Presentation of members' new books – *Holgate Dining Room Extension* Drinks reception sponsored by Sage Publishing, publishers of *Studies in Christian Ethics*
19:30—21:00	Conference Dinner – *Holgate Dining Room Extension* *Bar open*
21:00—23:30	Social Time - *Bar open*
Saturday 7 September	
07:30—08:45	Breakfast – *Holgate Dining Room* Checkout is by 09:30. All attendees must vacate their rooms by 09:30 and all keys must be returned to the Security Lodge on the University campus. Luggage may be left at De Grey 127.
08:30—08:50	Morning Prayer led by Helen Dawes – *Chapel* Please find the prayers at https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-in-daily-prayer/morning-prayer-contemporary-saturday-7-september-2024

09:00—10:40	Short Paper Session 2
	
	Track 1 (Chair: Philip Ziegler) – *De Grey 123*
	
	    a. Sam Ashton: Shalom and Its Shattering: The Necessary Contribution of Creation and Fall to Explain Diversity and Decline in Sexed Embodiment
	
	    b. Rebecca Leong: Virtue and Dating in Contemporary Anglo-American Contexts: A Story of Decline and/or Flourishing? Sociological and Theological Ethical Perspectives
	
	Track 2 (Chair: Esther Reed) – *De Grey 119*
	
	    c. Ximian Xu (Simeon): Growth or Decline: Christian Virtues and Artificial Moral Advisors
	
	    d. Robert Heimburger: 'We Must Obey God Rather than Humans': The Political Witness of Global Christians in Unregistered University Ministries Interpreting the Book of Acts
	
	    e. Edmund Jessop: Civilian Immunity in War, Complicity and Bombing Policies
	
	Track 3 (Chair: Yves De Maeseneer) – *De Grey 125*
	
	    a. Medi Ann Volpe: Why Trump Can't 'Make America Great Again': Christian Ethics and the Decline of American Civil Religion (A True Story)

	b. Nicholas Townsend: Appropriating Charles Taylor Reductively: An Assessment of Carl Trueman's Declension Narrative c. Mark Dawson: The Rise of Populism and the Decline in the Quality of Public Discussion: How Can Theology Respond?
10:40—11:00	Refreshments – *De Grey 125*
11:00—12:30	Plenary Session 4: DECL<u>AI</u>NE - How the Design of AI is Eroding Our Humanity – *De Grey 125* Speaker: Dr Eve Poole Respondent: Matthew Prior Chair: Medi Ann Volpe
12:30—12:45	Closing Remarks – *De Grey 125* Professor Brian Brock (Incoming SSCE President)
12:45—13:45	Lunch – *Holgate Dining Room Extension* Departures

Locations

For locations, please see https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/map/ or use common mapping apps and sites.

Audio/video

Screens for slide presentations are available in all rooms. If presenters wish to use slides and PowerPoint, please bring your slides on a memory stick and arrive before the start of the session to load these on the computers in the rooms.

Protecting compromised immune systems

The SSCE recognizes that a number of delegates have compromised immune systems or live in households with those who do, whether due to COVID-19 or other factors. SSCE understands that to ensure greater protection, staff at York St John University have confirmed that the following measures are in place: De Grey Court rooms have ventilation systems using fresh outside air; in catering facilities, ventilation air-change rates are good too; meeting and catering rooms will be cleaned each day; in catering facilities, delegates may sit by an open window or sit outside.

Delegates are asked to bring face masks if they wish to wear them. Red lanyards will be available at registration for those who wish to keep at a distance from other delegates.

The following website offers guidance from the UK Health Security Agency published in 2022 (including a downloadable booklet) on living safely with respiratory infections, including COVID-19: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/living-safely-with-respiratory-infections-including-covid-19#contents

Sensitive topics

As is often the case in Christian ethics, the conference programme includes discussion of potentially sensitive and controversial topics. SSCE exists to provide a forum for the robust, critical, and civil discussion of such topics. However, we are conscious that some participants might find some of these discussions distressing or disturbing, and the Revd Dr Jennifer Moberly has kindly agreed to be available during the conference for any participants who would appreciate a confidential pastoral conversation. She can be contacted by email at j.l.moberly@outlook.com. Please note that Jennifer will be available in this role only during the conference itself. Following the conference, participants are encouraged to seek any further pastoral support from their own networks.

You are also welcome to raise any concerns with the officers of SSCE:

- President (until 7 Sept 2024): Prof. Neil Messer, president@ssce.org.uk
- President (from 7 Sept 2024): Prof. Brian Brock, president@ssce.org.uk
- Secretary: Revd Dr Andrew Bowyer, secretary@ssce.org.uk
- Treasurer and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion contact: Dr Rebecca Leong, treasurer@ssce.org.uk
- Conference Secretary: Dr Robert Heimburger, conference@ssce.org.uk

Abstracts

Plenary papers

Neil Messer: The Decline of the Human? Identity, Agency, and Justice in an Age of Emerging Neurotechnologies

Emerging neurotechnologies promise to make possible the collection and analysis of users' brain data, the connection of brains to machines or other brains, and modification of brain functions. This paper explores questions about identity, agency, moral responsibility, and social justice raised by these technological prospects. These questions will be address in light of some key theological and ethical themes: the image of God, the body of Christ, and the common good. The *imago Dei* will be understood "performatively": not concerned so much with defining the human as with "actively *seeking* humanity" (Alistair McFadyen) where the humanity of some is placed in doubt. In dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I shall argue that a faithful performance of the *imago* will enact the vision of human sociality offered by the metaphor of the body of Christ: one of mutual interconnectedness without loss of identity, in which agency and responsibility can be shared and mutually supported without being lost or obscured. Social justice concerns connect with this Bonhoefferian account of responsibility, and will be explored further through the lens of the common good.

Nicholas Adams: Crisis and Solidarity: Theology and Religious Studies in Britain

Eboni Marshall Turman: Make the Church Great Again: Black Womanist Christian Ethics and the Paradox of Decline

Eve Poole: DECLAINE - How the Design of AI is Eroding our Humanity

The race is on to develop Artificial General Intelligence. The assumption within the AI community is that an artificial brain that complex would naturally develop consciousness. This spectre has given rise to calls for a global pause while regulation catches up, because of fears about The Control Problem, or what happens if AI goes rogue. This paper will look at how this problem is tackled in human design, in the light of the emergence of 'self-aware' autonomous robots. It turns out that most of the elements of our design that are salient for the moderation of our free will have not been copied into AI, because they are considered 'junk code.' But if we are made in the image of God, these must be features, not bugs; and the Christian community is the embodiment of over two thousand years of practices designed to keep humanity on track. This has implications for where routes to solution might be found in the development of frontier AI.

<u>**Short papers**</u>

Quan Li (Luke): Divine Transcendence and the Decline of Revolutionary Heroism

This paper offers a critical examination of how divine transcendence undermines revolutionary heroism within Chinese moral and political theology. Over the past four decades, the Sino-Christian theology movement has profoundly shaped the moral discourse within the Chinese Christian community. A consensus among scholars highlights the pivotal roles of individuals such as Liu Xiaofeng and other cultural Christians in spearheading this movement, emerging in response to the moral crises of the post-Mao era. Their objective was to delineate the

Christian concept of divine transcendence as the ultimate source of morality. This paper, however, introduces a refined account of the movement's intellectual origins by reevaluating two foundational efforts to cultivate this concept as a form of resistance against the Maoist regime. Through an in-depth analysis of seminal works by Liu Xiaofeng and Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo—a crucial yet unrecognized inspiration for the neo-Calvinist church movement—this study elucidates the complex roles of divine transcendence in challenging revolutionary heroism, the normative core of Maoism. Initially, both figures invoked the idea of divine transcendence in their critiques of revolutionary heroes and morals, particularly the absolute loyalty to Mao and the pursuit of extreme violence. Furthermore, their analysis of the decline and their proposed solutions diverged, aligning with the principles of modern liberal theology and political philosophy. Most critically, their depiction of transcendent Christ as a suffering hero informed their distinct approaches to revolutionary heroism. This portrayal was, in turn, shaped by their own revolutionary experiences and identities. Thus, this paper contributes a novel interpretation of the intellectual history of the Sino-Christian theology movement and an unacknowledged perspective on the formation of the Christian moral landscape amidst Communist vision and violence.

Victoria Phillips and Katie Hsu: The Decline of the Christian Female Missionary Memoir: Nineteenth-Century International Christian Educational Outreach and the Rise of Secularized Twentieth-Century Isolationism in the United States

In the early spring of 1815 in her last teenage year, Harriet Lathrop calmed herself after she had secretly read forbidden histories or the poetry of Byron. As an overly intelligent and "masculine" girl, her mother offered Harriet The Memoirs of Harriet Newell, Teenage Missionary Wife. With this book, Harriet became inspired; she, too, wanted to become a missionary, and soon married Reverend Winslow. Twenty years later, Memoir of Mrs. Harriet Lathrop Winslow, Thirteen Years a Member of the American Mission in Ceylon hit the booksellers' shelves in the United States.

By 1854, publishers had released over twenty-six American female missionary memoirs, some considered best-sellers, and others selling 3,000 copies in mere days. Those who came after Newell established international schools for women, created medical facilities and hospitals, taught and translated, crafted dictionaries, hymns, and biblical passages in native languages. As more women wanted to become missionaries, women's colleges opened to train them: Mt. Holyoke opened a floodgate. As women educated women abroad, they solidified the case for their own education.

Yet in 1854, the American Board of Missions became dissatisfied with the proliferation of mission schools and attempted to shut down the efforts. Yet in some countries, local women had already taken administrative and teaching roles; they breathed new life into the schools during the American retreat. Yet by 1865, the end of the US Civil War left a surplus of American women, and the rise of the single female missionary began. While on the first ship carrying Newell had not even counted her as a missionary, because she was a wife, by the 1870s documented female missionaries far outnumbered the men. But few published memoirs as domestic educated women had a plethora of offerings with the rise of the "Republican mother," who was valued as an educated female for domestic political purposes.

Recent histories have decried early US missionary efforts as the product of empire and understand a "soft" US imperialism that relied on male missionaries, largely replaced by diplomats and politicians by the twentieth century. They sought profits through the geographic spread of products, consumerism, capitalism, and the "American way of life." In these narratives, Christianity and Christian ethics become secularized and masculinized. The fallout of this logic can be seen in the bible repackaged by President Donald Trump who interlaces biblical passages with the United States constitution and put a cover on this new King James version that includes an embossed American flag.

Because the rush of American female memoirs that depicted a non-nationalist humanitarian approach to foreign populations has not been analysed, the significance of this decline cannot be understood as a part of a growing US gendered nationalism that has overpowered ethics and humanitarianism. This case study of the nineteenth-century US female memoir, proposed as a significant literary and political genre, elucidates the rise and a subsequent decline in US humanitarian Christian outreach that was deeply influenced by women.

The untapped plethora of memoirs, most of which have been digitized, offer a significant opportunity for analysis through the use of the digital humanities and artificial intelligence techniques, alongside traditional

historical analysis. This presentation will show how the collaboration between an established scholar and an emerging analyst can marry the two techniques to produce new questions and insights.

Rebecca Leong: Virtue and Dating in Contemporary Anglo-American Contexts: A Story of Decline and/or Flourishing? Sociological and Theological Ethical Perspectives

In today's Anglo-American dating landscape, diverse forms of practices intersect with social and economic changes, medical advances and technological developments. I consider several significant themes in heterosexual dating culture in contemporary Anglo-American contexts, including in view of developments related to and after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in Western societies. In this pluralistic context, I identify and assess the significance of the following six features or themes:

A continuing shift towards the form of "pure relationship" (referring to Giddens' definition of the term): partly as a trajectory of development from the sexual revolution.

Culture wars: including on matters concerning sexuality, with often polarised positions between conservatives and progressives/liberals.

Economic insecurity: heightened economic concerns especially after the global economic crisis of 2008, but with roots and developments occurring decades before 2008, characterised by the decline of financial and social safety nets.

Medical advances significantly lowering the traditional risks or costs of sexual interactions and enabling the normalisation of casual sexual interactions: particularly the widespread availability of reliable contraception and improved treatments for sexually transmitted infections.

Increased sexualisation of everyday culture: including with the ubiquity of sexualized images in the vast majority of people's everyday experiences, and widespread availability of high-quality pornography, again fuelled by technology, including the internet and other media.

Fast-improving technology and the internet: leading to the phenomenon, unprecedented in previous generations, of the ubiquity of social media, online dating and dating apps, with their accompanying advantages, risks, opportunities and pitfalls.

Further, I suggest that both "purity culture" (associated, for example, with "promise rings", "purity balls" and programmes such as "Silver Ring Thing" and so on) and "hook-up culture" are both at least partly manifestations (though expressed in markedly different ways) of a neoliberal worldview (defined particularly in terms of a consumerist market-driven focus), which I suggest is antithetical to an authentically Christian worldview. It appears that an established "market" for sex exists and is a driving force for human sexual relationships in contemporary Anglo-American contexts, both among Christians and non-Christians, though manifested in varied ways (for example in the "culture wars" between adherents of "hook-up culture" and "purity culture").

Hence, pushing back to some extent against reductionistic and dehumanising tendencies prevalent in contemporary contexts that approach human intimate relationships primarily in terms of "market", "exchange", and satisfaction of mostly temporal desires, I advocate a virtue ethical (rather than purely deontological or utilitarian) approach to sexual ethics – and particularly for dating in contemporary contexts – that is neither in the direction of "purity culture" nor "hook-up culture", nor following any (other) neoliberal currents, but which is grounded in full-fledged Christian theology and a vision of true humanity. A five-fold ethic is proposed for application to contemporary dating, composed of the four classical virtues (prudence, justice, courage/fortitude, and temperance) and an overarching recalibrating virtue of love and care.

Ximian Xu (Simeon): Growth or Decline: Christian Virtues and Artificial Moral Advisors

 'The remarkable developments in the field of technology,' Pope Francis said, 'in particular those dealing with artificial intelligence [AI], raise increasingly significant implications in all areas of human activity.' This paper seeks to develop an interdisciplinary study on AI's impact on human moral life with an emphasis on Christian virtue ethics. Some recent studies on AI ethics suggest that AI-driven systems can be applied to human moral

enhancement. Such AI- driven systems are called artificial moral advisor (AMA), which generates moral decisions for humans or assist human agents in moral decision-making.

A virtue refers to a trait or excellence that gives birth to right actions leading to flourishing. A virtue may grow or wither across time. In the sphere of ethics, virtues that grow will foster morality. Christian virtues that are cultivated towards maturity are embodied in Christian moral life, which is growing towards the ideals set by God in divine grace. The maturation of Christian virtues involves, among others, moral deliberation, decision-making, and moral actions. Hence, a question arises: To what extent does an AMA facilitate the growth of Christian virtues?

To address this question, I will first introduce the idea of AMA and examine how it may be used to enhance human morality as proposed in the present literature on AI ethics. It will be demonstrated that an AMA is likely to arrest human moral capabilities. All the worse is that an AMA may be abused to undermine moral virtues. That said, an AMA that is designed for a specific context may enhance the growth of moral virtues in one way or another. Second, I will flesh out the meaning of Christian virtues, which is that Christian life as a whole is characterised by virtues that emanate from God's grace and grow within humans toward the telos set by God. Third, I will demonstrate what AMAs cannot offer to the cultivation of Christian virtues and how AMAs may result in the decline of Christian virtues. At the same time, an AMA's potential for Christian moral growth will be investigated.

By doing so, the main argument of this paper will come to the fore: despite that AI exerts a moral impact on human life, Christian ethics should refrain from deliberatively or unwittingly making the cultivation of virtues subordinate to AI, though the AMA can be considered a God- given tool for the growth of virtues. The cultivation of Christian virtues needs to come a long way to maturity under the auspices of God's grace, which is far beyond AI's mathematical models.

John Huggins: The Role of Hope in the Midst of Fear to Motivate Care and Action Regarding the Climate Crisis: Preliminary Results from Qualitative Research Amongst Christians in the Diocese of Canterbury

Noting that only a minority in the churches in which I serve show overt interest in the climate crisis, this paper details a qualitative study in practical theology asking those who did show such involvement what motivated them, particularly relating to whether hope was a factor in this motivation. Twelve people have been interviewed using a semi-structured approach, all within or with links to the Diocese of Canterbury. All interviewees self-declared that they were Christian, believed that human activity significantly contributes to climate change and that there is a climate crisis at this time. All spoke imaginatively about fear of (and sometimes anger at) the crisis, and about hope being an important element in their motivation to action. The sense that emerged was that it was the tension between these two factors that stimulated people to care and act, rather than either factor alone. Hope in the midst of fear (and sometimes anger) was the central emerging concept for all interviewees. This is interesting, because ecological literature contains proposals by some that hope is already lost or is even the problem in itself. The narrative emerging from this research does not support these positions. Instead, the narrative aligns more closely with a related construct from Pikhala (2018) of hope in the midst of tragedy.

A model is under construction from areas that the interviewees spoke of that affect this hope. These areas are in no case common to all interviewees, but indicate the variety of motivators between Christians and how these may blend in any one person. The additional elements that have emerged to date are: hope in caring, hope as humanity, hope as Christians and hope through science. The area of 'hope as Christians' is further subdivided' into hope and the church, spirituality and hope, social hope and eschatological hope. My hope in undertaking this research is that unlocking the sources of hope that reposition Christians from apathy towards action will give a wellspring of practical ideas to encourage others within churches in Canterbury Diocese and, potentially, more widely in the UK, to become active in their hearts and actions towards the climate disaster.

Stephen Goundrey-Smith: Anglican Bioethics in the Twentieth Century: Difference or Decline?

With various ethical issues facing the Anglican church, there is often a popular narrative that the church is in decline in its moral thought, and is more willing to compromise with the secular world than ever before. In this paper, I challenge this simplistic view, in respect of Anglican bioethical thinking during the twentieth century.

I explore whether Church of England bioethical thinking has indeed been in decline during the twentieth century, or whether it is simply different to that of the Roman Catholic church. I analyse the comparative responses of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church to two important bioethical issues during the course of the twentieth century: a) increasing use of contraception from the 1930s onwards, and b) the development of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) from 1978 onwards, together with the possibility of embryo research.

Accounting for the key differences between the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in organisational structure and social context, I identify some distinctive features of Anglican moral theology – that it arises from the praxis of Christians in community, that it is sensitive to social and cultural context, that it is primarily pastoral rather than legal/juridical, and that it acknowledges, and indeed accepts, a pluralistic world.

I argue that Anglican bioethical thinking has been notably casuistic in method, and that this has been demonstrated in the approaches of the two Anglican moralists who have been most influential in relation to these two issues, Kenneth Kirk and Gordon Dunstan. Moreover, the differences between the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches can be clearly seen with contraception and IVF; although, during the history of the Church of England, there has been much agreement between the two churches on moral issues (if not ecclesiological and sacramental issues), the sharpest disagreement between the two churches has been in relation to these particular issues.

I conclude that a narrative of decline to describe Anglican bioethics is not warranted, and that the Church of England takes a distinctive and complex approach to bioethical issues. Moreover, further work is needed in future to develop the Anglican tradition of moral medicine, to ensure that its insights will be beneficial when considering responses to novel future technologies, such as human enhancement technologies.

Edmund Jessop: Civilian Immunity in War, Complicity and Bombing Policies

A traditional defence of killing civilians in war calls upon some version of the doctrine of double effect. On this doctrine, the death of civilians is justified if the primary aim of the military operation is to kill enemy combatants or destroy military facilities: concomitant civilian deaths, even when entirely predictable, are regarded as justifiable if not directly intended by the military goal. A recent turn has seen the concept of civilian immunity questioned: it is argued that the entire adult population of a warring state may be complicit, to a great or lesser extent, in the operations of its armed forces, hence forfeiting any putative right to immunity from being killed. In this paper I examine whether the concepts of complicity and corporate responsibility provide an adequate justification for practices such as bombing (or bombardment) of targets likely to cause civilian deaths.

Resources for the discussion are provided by Scripture, theology and contemporary criminal law in the United Kingdom. The Hebrew bible contains many examples of the Hebrew people being held collectively responsible for wrongdoing. Punishment as an outcome is less evident in the New Testament, but churches as collective entities are condemned for wrongdoing in both Paul's letters and the book of Revelation. Aquinas sets out nine categories of complicity, as analysed recently by Mellema. Three of these categories relate to inaction – silence, not preventing, and failure to denounce – which may implicate an entire population. This is too broad a category to justify a death sentence, as happens in bombing. The concept of joint enterprise in United Kingdom law has been used to convict of murder many men and women who were complicit but did not themselves do the killing. This concept has been heavily criticized by practicing lawyers on many grounds but particularly because in practice it has been used to convict disproportionately people from stigmatized ethnic minorities with very low evidential thresholds. In war, entire populations are typically stigmatized as 'the enemy' with on the basis of scant reliable evidence.

There is one example which may potentially represent the ethical use of bombing of non-military targets, namely British policy for operations in Africa, Arabia and Waziristan during the 1930s as set out in a neglected paper by Charles Portal, who went on to become head of the Royal Air Force in World War II. This precedent has, however, several features which are not found in today's conflicts and I conclude that killing of civilians is never justified.

Joel Pierce: On Revelations: Loving a World Full of Failure

Success is often seen, but rarely experienced; failure is often experienced but seldom seen. At a personal level it is easy to fall into comparing our lack of success to that of celebrities or the curated social media profiles of friends. At a societal level, our collective knowledge of ongoing failures to address problems such as the climate crisis often exists as an anxious background hum, drowned out by more palatable stories about political ambition, technological breakthroughs, and blockbuster entertainments. In this paper, I will be drawing on the conceptual vocabulary of Hannah Arendt, while putting her in conversation with both Augustine and theologians in the Augustinian tradition, to explore why we find it so hard to look at failure and how we can cope with a world full of failure better.

Making use of previous theological engagements with Arendt, such as the work of Mathewes, Gregory, and Kiess, I will argue that Arendt has valuable insights to offer about the contingency and fragility of our shared world. Drawing from her work *Lying in Politics*, I will argue that one way failure can become visible is when our attempts at image management and out-narrating it are finally brought to heel by reality. I will also attend to how the recognition by Arendt that failure is a regular part of human life is balanced by her emphasis on natality and new beginnings. While Arendtian natality is typically translated into a theological key via the language of creation, I will explore whether a more appropriate register is the language of redemption or analogies to resurrection. These latter categories, I will argue, better capture the miraculous and unforeseen way in which natality interrupts into public life within Arendt. Having established these theological links with Arendt's vocabulary, I will attempt to show how they set us up to acknowledge the true weight of the possibility of personal or societal failure (or even societal collapse), without this leading us to despair or inaction. If failure reveals the reality which exists underneath all our image making, Christians can affirm that one of the features of that reality is God's love for of the world, even a world ravaged by our failures, and it is this which can ground our love of and action within the world into which we find ourselves thrown.

Robert Heimburger: 'We Must Obey God Rather than Humans': The Political Witness of Global Christians in Unregistered University Ministries Interpreting the Book of Acts

This paper presents the political witness of those from around the world who are involved in unregistered Christian university ministries. These women and men provide a unique theological perspective on Christian living within contemporary authoritarian regimes. I present their perspective, drawn from interviews and focal groups where they interpret passages from the Acts of the Apostles involving persecution and prison like Acts 4, 5, 12, 16, and 28. I present their insights about earthly government and false worship, about how surveillance turns a country into a prison, and about hope in the face of danger. I interrogate their testimonies, asking how they relate with groups like Muslims who face similar difficulties, and I reflect on how narratives of persecution can be misused by Christians in the North Atlantic. I place their testimonies in conversation with writing and sermons on Acts by two figures who experience political persecution: Chinese house church pastor Wang Yi, in prison since 2019, and Chilean scholar Pablo Richard, who fled the Pinochet regime. I ask how these voices can inform churches around the world about what it means when the apostles say, 'We must obey God rather than humans' (Acts 5:29, CEB).

This research has been reviewed by scholars and advisers for the relevant university ministries, and it has received research ethics approval from my university (identifiers and names withheld to maintain anonymity).

Jackie Tait: For the Years the Locusts Have Eaten: A Liberation Ethics Perspective on Pandemic Vulnerability and Exclusion

Liberation theologies give priority to the lived experience of oppressed and marginalised communities, employing the resonances between present suffering and emancipatory themes within the Biblical narrative to articulate a new hope, establish liberating Christian practices and advocate for structural solutions, from within situations of deprivation, trauma and despair.

Drawing on Thomas Schubeck's assessment of the ethical import of this influential theological movement, this paper sketches a liberation ethics centred on the experience of those who have suffered disproportionately throughout the pandemic, focusing especially on families with clinically vulnerable loved ones, and those with persistent infection or post-viral complications now facing an uncertain future blighted by chronic illness.

Building on Rebecca Chopp's model of theology as a praxis of solidarity with those who suffer, and insights from autistic scholar Claire Williams's "Peculiar Discipleship", I will argue that practices of solidarity and hospitality towards the most vulnerable are core requirements of Christian ethics. Such practices are the place where the Church can meet and listen to those who, as Shelly Rambo puts it, remain abandoned in the trauma and shame of Holy Saturday. I will emphasise the natural right of vulnerable people to safe assemblies: places of welcome where all God's beloved children are affirmed as worthy of dignity and equal personhood. And I will suggest ways in which the Church can model a cultural revival, countering the dangerous decline of compassion, hospitality and solidarity in our societies that has been accelerated by the collective trauma of the pandemic experience.

Sam Ashton: Shalom and Its Shattering: The Necessary Contribution of Creation and Fall to Explain Diversity and Decline in Sexed Embodiment

Some contemporary Christian ethicists (e.g., Susannah Cornwall and Adrian Thatcher) celebrate sexual polymorphism as an expression of creational diversity. "Male and female" (Gen 1:27) represent poles on a spectrum rather than a rigid binary of sexual dimorphism. Traditional appeals to a "fall" from original perfection, and subsequent decline narratives, should be rejected as pastorally devastating and academically unwarranted. However, if all sexed bodily diversity participates in the "very good" of creation (Gen 1:31), how may one account for quotidian experiences of bodily decline?

In this paper I argue that the theodramatic loci of creation and fall, classically conceived, help explain both diversity and decline in sexed embodiment. I develop my thesis by attending to the theological concept of shalom (ordered peace) in Genesis 1–3. In the event of creation, Gen 1:2 (תהו ובהו) sets up a problem that the rest of Genesis 1 resolves. The earth was initially "formless and fruitless," yet God brings form and order to creation so that it may become fruitful, and so enjoy its ordered peace (shalom). Humans, as part of creation, are formed for fruitfulness—spiritual and social fruitfulness (Genesis 2), as well as reproductive fruitfulness (Gen 1:28). Such sexual fruitfulness requires a "sexuate correspondence" between one male and one female— a creational norm rather than merely a commission for the statistical majority. Importantly, sexual dimorphism in creation does not dehumanise intersex persons. It minimally suggests that a theological explanation for intersexuality needs to supplement the perspective of creation. One such viewpoint is the fall.

One consequence of the fall in Genesis 3 is the introduction of human death, "for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). Examining the impact of the fall (particularly its malum poena [not culpa]) upon the sexed body indicates that death is an all-pervasive decaying power, shattering shalom, disordering both sexual function (e.g., barrenness in Gen 16:2) and sexed form (e.g., congenital eunuchism, possibly in Lev 21:20) to varying degrees east of Eden. Epistemically, the prelapsarian exclusive norm of sexual dimorphism became the statistical majority post-fall. The empirical expression of humanity's sexuate correspondence now clusters around two poles of "male" and "female."

Thus, the theological explanation for the existence of intersexuality from the perspectives of creation and fall is that of impairment—disordered diversity in a diversely disordered world. Given that sin and death privatively disorder the "direction" rather than the metaphysical "structure" of humanity, this judgment does not make those with intersex conditions any less human than the unambiguously sexed. Death touches all. So intersex individuals are not more fallen but differently fallen. Every body is subject to "death because of sin" (Rom 8:10). Every mortal body needs life from the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:11). Everybody needs the restoration of shalom. Recovering the necessary contribution of creation and fall to explain diversity and decline in sexed embodiment drives a Christian sexual ethic towards the greater, transformative contribution of redemption in Christ.

Christy Wang: Capitalising on Spiritual Decline: Moral Policing as Profiteering in the Post-Revolutionary England

The Societies for the Reformation of Manners emerged shortly after the Revolution of 1688 as an ecumenic, voluntary movement that aspired to a nation-wide moral reformation and spiritual revival. Feeding on renewed anxieties over the nation's spiritual decline amongst many, these societies sought to wipe out moral offences, such as prostitution, drunkenness, stealing, and swearing, so as to remove the perceived causes of divine displeasure, restore godly living, and secure God's favour upon England. However, were these

providentialist narratives of decline always genuine calls for reform? While scholars recognise that these societies brought enormous socio-political benefits to their sponsors, a thorough analysis of the corruptive tendencies of these seemingly reputable schemes still awaits.

This paper focuses on the abuse of providential rhetoric and corrupt policing of Charles Hitchin (c. 1675–1727), who repackaged his questionable profiteering as admirable practices of ethics through repeated manipulation of 'God-talk'. Hitchin was a thief-taker, a marshal of the City of London, and an agent of the Society for the Reformation of Manners. Instead of actively pursuing the proclaimed goal of the reformation of manners, i.e., the suppression of all vices, and rigorously bringing pickpockets to justice, Hitchin cultivated a wide network of pickpockets who yielded the stolen goods to him in order to avoid prosecution. The thief-taker then demanded fees from the victims of crime in exchange of their stolen belongings. Wealthy tradesmen and merchants were particularly vulnerable to Hitchin's exploitation because they desperately sought to recover valuable goods and commercial papers. Hitchin's dubious policing perfectly reflected the intricate nature of a rapidly growing market of piety that emerged under the name of piety and godly reforms against spiritual decline. This paper will further juxtapose Hitchin's profiteering and theologisation thereof with other similar cases, most notably that of his rival Jonathan Wild.

This paper argues that post-revolutionary narratives of decline and accompanying providentialist calls for reform formed a complex dynamic with the 'ungodly' transgressors and marginal communities. Profitable policing ultimately relied heavily on the presence, indeed prevalence, of perceived ungodliness. More broadly, this paper critically engages debates in current scholarship over whether the post-revolutionary Church of England was on spiritual decline or in resurgence by highlighting these discussions as essentially early modern dilemmas. Instead of choosing between the thesis of degeneration and that of revival, this case study goes beyond these tensions in order to investigate the utility and commerciality of the contemporary narratives of spiritual decline as well as the usefulness of the doctrine and language of providence in these narratives.

Medi Ann Volpe: Why Trump Can't 'Make America Great Again': Christian Ethics and the Decline of American Civil Religion (A True Story)

In 1991, I wrote a paper arguing that American civil religion, which embraced concepts like the fallibility of human being, crashed hard in the 1970's following the Watergate scandal. I analysed the rhetoric of key presidential speeches (like the Gettysburg Address and John F Kennedy, Jr's inauguration speech) to discern the outline of a civil religion that, in the 1960's, still had a 'prophetic' strand. It was not uncommon for presidents to suggest that America was not doing 'great' and to call on the people to act: 'ask not what your country can do for you…' Humility and self-sacrifice were part of what had made the USA what it was, and those characteristics remained a part of presidential, civil-religious rhetoric. But Nixon had campaigned with Billy Graham and put himself forward as the 'Christian' candidate, the one who could be trusted and admired. The Watergate scandal exposed the emptiness of Nixon's rhetoric and left the civil religion in crisis. The 1980 election took the country's civil religious temperature. The candidate calling for belt-tightening lost to the candidate declaring that America was as great as ever. Of course, there was more to the 1980 election than that, but the results suggest that the civil religion was in decline.

In this paper I return to presidential rhetoric to sketch a healthy American civil religion and argue that there were values at its heart that enabled the USA to recover from the civil war and become a key player in world diplomacy. Trump does not want to make America great again; he wants to redefine 'greatness' and make the USA the kind of country the framers of the Constitution intended it never to become. Unfortunately—as I will argue—the story of the decline of American civil religion is a true story. In the paper, I will examine the place of Christian ethics in the first two centuries of the American republic; I hope to create a space for imagining a new place for Christian ethics in the (naked) public square.

Nicholas Townsend: Appropriating Charles Taylor Reductively: An Assessment of Carl Trueman's Declension Narrative

Carl Trueman's 2020 book, The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self, has received great praise for the clarity of its exposition and the cogency of its argument.[1]1 Trueman presents a historical narrative of expressive individualism, from Rousseau, via the "shotgun marriage" of Marx and Freud in Wilhelm Reich, to twenty-first century sexual identity politics. He shows persuasively how this view of humanness has become so influential in Western cultural imagination. His narrative is certainly of decline.

A fine feature of Trueman's book is that he sets out plainly how he approaches the historical material. He draws on conceptuality and the accounts of modernity in Alasdair MacIntyre, Philip Rieff and Charles Taylor. Taylor's analyses in Sources of the Self and A Secular Age do the most work, including the concepts of 'the social imaginary' and 'the politics of recognition'.

This paper will briefly expound Trueman's declension narrative. Recognising the great illumination it gives, the paper will then argue that Trueman's account has one main inadequacy. It will conclude by pointing to adverse consequences of this for Christian public engagement in ethically contentious areas.

The inadequacy is that Trueman reduces to one what Taylor distinguished as three, deeply different streams of modern individualistic thought. They are (to use labels different from in Taylor), the hedonism derived from Hobbes that forged economic liberalism, the voluntarism that found fullest expression in Kant and generated rights-based liberalism, and the expressivism inspired by Rousseau, which is Trueman's focus. That element of reductivism has the effect that The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self reads as though it presents a complete account (as the title implies), when its narration covers just one of those three individualisms, not to mention modern communitarian visions.

The paper will, in concluding, focus on two consequences of this reduction for participation by Christians in public discourse on ethical questions:

If Christians are inclined to see twenty-first century US and wider Western culture as dominated by only expressivist individualism and corresponding sexual identity politics, they will tend towards participation in public discourse and politics on a limited and reactive agenda, missing much that the Bible, especially, should direct them to address.

By not giving attention to the other two streams of modern individualistic thought, Trueman (paradoxically) underestimates the difficulties that face Christians in any political engagement with ethical questions, as all three streams have generated arguments (different arguments; cf. Hayek, Rawls, Marcuse) for its illegitimacy.

Matthew Kirkpatrick: Time, Space, and Eschatology: Bonhoeffer and Tanner and the Epistemological Redemption of Decline - cancelled

In moments of decline, eschatology is often employed to overcome human anxiety, by promoting either a vision of historical fulfilment, or its rejection in favour of a spiritual beyond. No one saw this better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer who witnessed a crushed people turn to an extreme utopian vision and a Führer to lead them there. However, he also witnessed a church that either refused to accept its possible decline by uniting itself to such a political vision, or stood back from the world to let it take its course. For Bonhoeffer, such responses demonstrate the universal craving for security that our fallen human condition has produced – a condition that struggles to cope with failure, weakness, and so decline without a narrative, preferably eschatological, to anchor it. However, as highlighted in the work of Kathryn Tanner[2], we have now reached a time when no such narrative is easily defensible. The well-documented rise of anxiety amongst younger millennials and Generation Z simply highlights the lack of tools, spiritual or otherwise, we have to cope with the declining trajectory that accompanies so much of our present, Western existence. Through a critical comparison of their work, this paper will argue that Tanner and Bonhoeffer offer us resources for re-evaluating such an existential anchor.

For Tanner, eschatological thinking needs to replace a temporal perspective for a spatialised one, in which hope is found in a recognition of the true life that may be possible here around us. Our sense of fulfilment and

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[1] Carl R. Trueman, The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution (Crossway, 2020).

[2] Cf. Kathryn Tanner, 'Eschatology and Ethics.' In Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (OUP, 2007).

so security, therefore, is not found in the assurance of temporal success, nor dashed by its decline, but rather in a life lived in an unwavering God, and the interpenetrating connections this creates with the world around us. Bonhoeffer affirms a futurist narrative, but likewise concludes that it does not anchor us in a future hope but kenotically directs us back to fulfilment in our presence and participation in what God is doing around us. For both thinkers, therefore, fulfilment is found not in hope of God's successful control of time, but a transformation of how we see the world through God's local activity. As Bonhoeffer noted to his seminarians as the church declined all around, "We still refuse to accept that God's cause is not always the cause of success and that we could really be "unsuccessful" even following the right path. But it is precisely here that it will become decisive whether we have started out in faith or in Enthusiasm."[3] Through this new lens, both thinkers see success or decline are transcended by our focus on what God is creating, whether through construction or destruction, and our participation in that activity.

Mark Dawson: The Rise of Populism and the Decline in the Quality of Public Discussion: How Can Theology Respond?

Firstly, the paper will discuss the meaning of populism and how its rise is linked with the decline in the quality of public discussion. Referring to the work of Jan-Werner Müller (2017), I indicate that populism is characterised by an attempt by political leaders to shore up identity and a sense of belonging in reaction to a perceived 'other.' Drawing on the thinking of the political philosopher, Michael Sandel (2009; 2020), I will argue that populist outlooks have served to close down meaningful public discussion. Public discourse is increasingly characterised by the assertion of criticism and an absence of listening and response. Examining public theology as it is described by Sebastian Kim, I point out the threat that the decline in public discussion poses to a theology that seeks to add its voice in civility in the public realm.

Having described the problem, I offer two areas of hope for the role of theology in the era of populism and decline in public debate. I will briefly outline the concept of the 'myth gap' as described by Alex Evans (2017), which describes the victory of emotion over rationality in public discourse. Rather than call for a return to the dominance of rationality, Evans recommends that those working for progressive values, need to complement rational argument with new myths that can engage the emotions as well as the intellect. For Evans, religion, spirituality, and the narratives of religious texts, all provide rich sources for the myths which can challenge the populist 'anti-myths' of fear and distrust. By way of example, I will briefly discuss the role of the biblical concept of hospitality as an insight informing public discussion on the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, citing the work of theologians Ross Langmead (2016) and Susanna Snyder (2012).

Whereas my first hopeful reflection is taken from observation of the success of populist narratives in enchanting a wide public, the second is offered as a reaction to these narratives. I argue that Evans (2017) is right to name populist narratives the 'anti-myths.' They are a negation without substance, rhetoric divorced from reality. What the Church has to offer is an antidote to the nothingness of populism. This antidote is praxis, where theology and the insights of faith are indivisible from action. Returning to the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, the Church can add a powerful voice, drawing on the insights of faith, and then also demonstrate that faith in action in the work that it does to assist refugees and asylum seekers in cities and towns across the UK. I point out its very visible expression in the concept of the City of Sanctuary. I conclude underlining how the many forms of Christian praxis can serve to strengthen public discussion, opening up space for discourse on ideas of justice and the common good.

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Susan Cross: Blaming the Faithful and Shaming the Clergy: Institutional Responses to Decline in the Church of England

Using Milbank's 2023 revisiting of parochial futures as a starting point, this paper will look at the underside of the pursuit of growth in the Church of England in the face of declining attendance. However, it will consider the impacts on people rather than structures. Accordingly, it will examine the rhetoric behind initiatives and identify the dissonance between such managerialism and the Christian gospel. This ethical slippage is exemplified in the 2021 furore over the evangelistic strategy that identified clergy as a 'key limiting factor' (McGinley, cf. Cottrell), and the constant lauding of instances of 'success', which results in equivocal messages about dispensability on the one hand, and the need for remedial effort and greater commitment on the other. Likewise, the ever-present narrative of decline has normalised an ageist response which idolises 'youthful' diversity (see Cottrell, 2020). The implicit vilification of older congregants in accounts of numerical decline is to forget the part played by retired clergy in sustaining parish ministry (eds Neal and Francis, 2020), and the fact that many churches only realised their reliance on the contribution of older people during the pandemic (Rich, 2020). Having considered the apparent lack of reflexivity, and the detrimental psychological and spiritual consequences of actions intended to redress decline, this paper will conclude by proposing that Quash's (2003) characterisation of the Anglican church as 'a polity of presence' resists unhelpful quantification, and provides a salutary corrective to institutional strategies that claim to value discipleship, but actually devalue and demoralise existing disciples.