

“It is not necessary to be a Christian to appreciate the force of Glen Scrivener’s argument in this punchy, engaging and entertaining book.”

TOM HOLLAND, Historian; Author, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*

“Brilliant, fascinating, readable and winsome! Glen Scrivener’s *The Air We Breathe* powerfully demonstrates how Christianity has shaped our Western values so much that we don’t even notice it. Highly recommended for skeptics, inquirers, believers, doubters and anyone wondering whether following Jesus still makes sense in the modern world.”

GAVIN ORTLUND, Author, *Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn’t*

“*The Air We Breathe* is a pithy, energetic and compelling exploration of how Christianity has formed our moral thinking—whether we realize it or not—and why the truth or falsehood of Christianity matters for all of us today. Whatever your current beliefs, I highly recommend you give Glen Scrivener a hearing!”

REBECCA McLAUGHLIN, Author, *Confronting Christianity*

“*The Air We Breathe* is a tour de force. Compressing 2,000 years of Western history into a couple of hundred pages, Glen has provided a brilliant summary of why the moral vision of the West is still fundamentally shaped by the Christian revolution. This is a must-read for any intellectually engaged person who is committed to human rights, compassion and progress but hasn’t yet been introduced to the one who inspired the values they believe in.”

JUSTIN BRIERLEY, Host, Premier’s *Unbelievable?* Radio Show and Podcast; Author, *Unbelievable? Why, After Ten Years of Talking with Atheists, I’m Still a Christian*

“Glen Scrivener does an outstanding job of showing us that the Western world is not nearly as post-Christian as we tend to think. The evidence and fruit of biblical influence is all around us—even our unbelief is more Christian than we might realise. This is an eye-opening and game-changing book.”

SAM ALLBERRY, Author; Speaker

“A really excellent book. The last time I read apologetics this compelling, it was by CS Lewis.”

STEVE HOLMES, Senior Lecturer in Theology, University of St Andrews

“Secular Westerners reject Christian belief while feasting on its fruit. Whether the subject is enlightenment or equality, compassion or consent, science or freedom or progress, our neighbors have Christianity to thank for the values they cherish. This argument is provocative, and demonstrably true. Building on groundbreaking historical scholarship, Glen Scrivener has made a case that cannot be ignored. This is one of the most important books I’ve read in a long time.”

MATT SMETHURST, Lead Pastor, River City Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia; Author, *Before You Open Your Bible* and *Before You Open Your Book*

“Glen Scrivener has done us a great favour. He has taken lengthy, scholarly (and sometimes boring) history tomes and transposed their ideas into something exciting, crystal clear, and almost impossible to put down. His central thesis is that our contemporary “secular” beliefs about equality, compassion, sexual consent and even progress all ultimately derive from the Christian faith. This thesis is not so controversial in learned circles, but with a few more books like *The Air We Breathe* it may soon become common knowledge. I hope this book is very widely read.”

JOHN DICKSON, Author; Historian; Distinguished Fellow, Ridley College

“A riveting, compelling and refreshing read. Glen bottles the air of the centuries (millennia, even), distilling it into this well-researched, short, snappy read. *The Air We Breathe* is a thoughtful excavation of seven values at the heart of our society and where they came from. It sparkles with Glen’s characteristically poetic storytelling, while incisively capturing abstract concepts and grounding them in historical and contemporary cultural examples. I enjoyed reading this book, and I look forward to sharing it with others.”

KRISTI MAIR, Author; Speaker; Academic

“We long for justice, freedom, and equality. We believe that each and every human being—no matter how rich or poor, powerful or weak—deserves fairness, dignity and respect. But where does this vision come from? Why are we so zealous for it? What if our values aren’t as self-evident as we think they are? This is why Glen Scrivener’s *The Air We Breathe* is a must-read for anyone who benefits from being WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic). This book will give us the basis for our shared vision. It will give us the story behind our values. By reading this book, we will humbly acknowledge the Composer from whose songsheet we’re singing.”

SAM CHAN, Third Space, thirdspace.org.au

“This is such a well-written, captivating book; I could barely put it down. Glen shows us that human rights, equality and justice have been ludicrous and offensive notions for most of history. These notions hold sway today only because the Christian world view won. Don’t believe it? Read the book.”

TIM FARRON, Member of Parliament, Westmorland and Lonsdale

“We are so accustomed to both Christianity and the criticisms of Christianity that we often forget the great blessings the Christian religion has brought to the world. Whether you need to be reminded of these gifts or to unwrap them for the first time, this book will challenge, encourage and enlighten you.”

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, Research Professor of English and Christianity and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; Author, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*

“Here is a fascinating, persuasive and urgently needed book. Glen presents the Christian cultural legacy as not only positive but so deeply ingrained in us that, without realising it, we often use it to attack what we dislike about ‘Christianity’. Glen also shows, by implication, what we stand to lose by Christianity’s erosion. Typically, however, he brings our attention back to the ‘author and perfecter’, Jesus Christ, asserting the simple (and maybe hard-to-face) conclusion that so much of what we know and love comes from him!”

JOEL VIRGO, Senior Pastor of Emmanuel Church, Brighton, UK

“Before the pandemic, like almost everyone else in London, I read Yuval Harari’s *Sapiens*. I was troubled by his cynical story of where we come from; even with my background in neuroscience, I found the reductionism unpersuasive. Glen Scrivener argues that our modern culture, and most of the values we hold dear, originated somewhere else entirely. Love him or hate him, the teachings of Jesus Christ have infused *The Air We Breathe* more than we know. A brilliant book.

DR ANDREW SACH, Pastor; Writer

“*The Air We Breathe* is the book we need right now. In it, Scrivener provides a compelling, well-researched and confident account of the West’s debt to Christianity and to Christ. The writing is full of energy and warmth. And, despite the academic rigour, the book’s tone is more that of an animated argument late at night in a pub: all friendly like, but with no holds barred. I’d put this into the hands of any of my secular friends in a heartbeat.”

RORY SHINER, Pastor; Author

“Dickens’ classic novel *Great Expectations* turns on the moment when its hero, Pip finds out that the criminal, Magwitch, had been his sole benefactor—a man whom he’d always thought of as just a convict was actually his patron! He had despised and dismissed the man, who had in fact given him a life. This book will provide a similar turning point for many. In a riveting sweep through culture, modern and ancient history, theology and philosophy, Glen Scrivener reveals a Christian inheritance which, to our great shame, we have also despised and dismissed. Even for me as a pastor, I found it caused a paradigm shift in terms of such values as equality and compassion, freedom and progress. A must-read if we want to crack the code of what’s going on in our culture.”

RICO TICE, Founder, Christianity Explored Ministries

“Fascinating and eye-opening, this is a book full of insight for our time. And more: it comes bursting with hope. Wonderful stuff!”

MICHAEL REEVES, President, Union School of Theology

HOW
WE ALL
CAME TO
BELIEVE IN

THE AIR WE BREATHE

FREEDOM,
KINDNESS,
PROGRESS,
AND
EQUALITY

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GLEN
SCRIVENER

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*To Julius —
now and for ever our JJ*

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INTRODUCTION

An older goldfish swishes past a couple of small fry.

“How’s the water, boys?” he enquires.

“Water?” they ask. “What’s water?”

Goldfish don’t see water. Goldfish see what’s in the water, they see what’s refracted through the water, but I assume (yes, assume—I haven’t done the proper investigations) that goldfish don’t see the water itself. And yet there it is. It’s their environment. Universal but invisible. It shapes everything they do and everything they see. But they don’t see *it*.

Here’s the contention of this book: if you’re a Westerner—whether you’ve stepped foot inside a church or not, whether you’ve clapped eyes on a Bible or not, whether you consider yourself an atheist, pagan or Jedi Knight—you are a goldfish, and Christianity is the water in which you swim.

Or, to say the same thing in a slightly different way, Christianity is the air we breathe. It is our atmosphere. It’s our environment, both unseen and all-pervasive. And in the tradition of a spiritual teacher (truth be told, I’m an Anglican clergyman, so the shoe fits), I’m going to ask you to *focus on your breathing*. This is a technique common to so many of the great religious traditions.

The spiritual teacher does not invite you to start breathing. You've got that life skill down pat—20,000 breaths a day; you're a natural! But there's something centring about noticing your breathing. Are you doing it now? Suddenly you're slowed down. You're aware of your dependence. You're inhabiting your body as a creature with needs and rhythms and physicality. You are mindful of your connection to the world around you and your place within it.

This book is like that practice. But instead of oxygen, I'm talking about beliefs and intuitions. What I want you to do is notice your dependence on the environment around you and your place within the world of ideas. Here's a chance to slow down and pay attention to the profoundly Christian atmosphere you inhabit.

“Christian?” you say. “I’m not sure my world is particularly *Christian*.” This book is, in large part, about making that case. You can be the judge of how successful it is, but here’s my contention: we depend on values and goals—and ways of thinking about values and goals—that have been deeply and distinctively shaped by the Jesus-revolution (otherwise known as “Christianity”). These values are now so all-pervasive that we consider them to be universal, obvious and natural: the air we breathe.

Over the next ten chapters we will pay attention to what, ordinarily, we take for granted. I hope it will be a useful exercise for everyone, no matter how you identify religiously. Here’s what you might stand to gain from it, depending on where you’re coming from.

THE VIEW FROM THE OUTSIDE: THE “NONEs”

The “nones” are a growing segment of Western society—those who, when asked on a survey for their religion, reply, “None”. Perhaps that’s you. You say, “Christianity? Remind me?” You’re unfamiliar with Christian teachings, but you’re interested enough to open up this book and have a look in. As you do so, you might consider yourself a total outsider to Christian faith. My first word is: don’t be so sure. Goldfish might not know the chemical composition of H₂O, but it’s still central to their lives. In the same way, I’m guessing that the concerns of the following chapters resonate with you: equality, compassion, consent, enlightenment, science, freedom and progress. None of these values are self-evident, nor are they widespread among the civilisations of the world. So where did they come from, and how did they get to become “the air we breathe”?

We can answer that question in one word, in two sentences or in ten chapters. The one-word answer is: Christianity. The two-sentence answer goes something like this:

The extraordinary impact of Christianity is seen in the fact that you don’t notice it. You already hold particularly “Christian-ish” views, and the fact that you think of these values as natural, obvious or universal shows how profoundly the Christian revolution has shaped you.

If the two-sentence summary strikes you as novel, bizarre, stupid or offensive, that’s ok. I don’t expect instant agreement. I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me—hence the need for the ten chapters. But, if you’re game,

I'd like to take you on a journey from the ancient world to the modern and from the beginning of the Bible to the end of history. I hope that along the way we'll have some fun, that you'll get a deeper appreciation for the values you cherish, and, most of all, that you'll see the power and profundity of Jesus and his revolution. In the meantime, let me turn to a different kind of objection.

THE VIEW FROM BEYOND: THE “DONES”

Perhaps you *are* familiar with Christianity, but you've rejected it. You object to the idea that Christianity is the air you breathe. You say, “Been there, done that. 13 years at a church school. No thanks!” Or you say, “I studied Christianity at this point or other”. Or, “I was a regular churchgoer, but it's no longer for me”. I take all of those experiences seriously. I can also respect the reasons why you might feel that the Christian faith is not for you. Nevertheless, I don't think you're done with Christianity, any more than you're done with breathing. It's not the sort of thing you point to, *over there, back then*. Like air, Christianity is so pervasive that we cannot help depending on it, even as we protest against it.

We might feel that Christianity is unequal, cruel, coercive, ignorant, anti-science, restrictive or backwards. That is, in fact, a pretty common list of objections to the Christian faith, and, at points, the shoe fits. But I didn't pick those seven objections at random. I simply reversed the seven core values at the heart of this book. The reason why those seven accusations bite is because, deep down, we believe in the seven values. Our problems with Christianity (and we all have problems with it, especially Christians!) turn out to be *Christian* problems.

So then, if you feel yourself to be “done” with Christianity, my desire is to take your critiques more seriously, not less. I want you to embrace those difficulties and press into them since, in truly owning those standards, you may well find yourself coming closer to the essence of Christian faith. At the end of the book I hope to show you some positive steps forward, not as a way of diminishing or dismissing your critiques but as a way of grounding them.

There’s a third kind of reader I’m interested in.

THE VIEW FROM WITHIN: THE “WONS”

Perhaps you are a Christian, and you’re looking out at a particularly fractious world. You’re wondering how we got here, where we’re heading and whether your faith—so ancient in its origins—can make sense of it all today. I want to encourage you to see that what we’re witnessing in the world are the ongoing convulsions of the Jesus revolution—a revolution predicted, proclaimed and propelled from the depths of history and experienced in the details of the everyday. In tracing the development of this revolution, I hope you’ll be strengthened in faith and encouraged to share it. Jesus Christ is not a peripheral concern for a few spiritual hobbyists. He’s the Lord of history, and in him our lives, our beliefs, our practices and our world make sense.

WHAT YOU WILL FIND

Here’s the journey I want to take you on. First, I want to show you that the air we breathe is peculiar. To do that we’ll have to leave our familiar environs. I had no idea how sweetly Australia smelt until I left. The eucalyptus

trees perfume the atmosphere, but I'd never noticed it until I'd spent years away from home. Now when I fly back to Sydney, it's the warm, sweet air that hits me first. In the next chapter I want to take us out of the familiar and place us in the ancient world—a world untouched by Christianity. We will notice the profound differences in culture, assumptions, beliefs, intuitions and ideals. Any notion that our modern, liberal views are obvious, natural or universal must contend with the profoundly alien views taken by the rest of the world and the rest of history. As the writer L.P. Hartley put it, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there".

Next, we will sketch out some major landmarks in the development of the Christian story as we explore seven values that are central to the modern outlook:

Equality: *We believe in the equal moral status of every member of the human family, no matter their rank, race, religion, gender or sexuality.*

Compassion: *We believe a society should be judged by the way it treats its weakest members.*

Consent: *We believe that the powerful have no right to force themselves on others.*

Enlightenment: *We believe in education for all and its power to transform a society.*

Science: *We believe in science: its ability to help us understand the world and improve our lives.*

Freedom: *We believe that persons are not property and that each of us should be in control of our own lives.*

Progress: *We believe in moral improvement over time and that we should continue to reform society of its former evils.*

The heart of the book comprises these seven chapters. Roughly speaking, we'll be moving from the beginning of the Bible through to today as the chapters progress: from Genesis to George Floyd. The equality chapter introduces teaching from the start of the Bible (the Old Testament). The compassion chapter explores the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth (the New Testament). The consent chapter follows the early church and its moral revolution. The enlightenment chapter sketches some developments between the fall of Rome (410) and the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. The science chapter spends much of its time with the founders of the modern scientific method (in the 16th and 17th century). The freedom chapter explores the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath (the 18th and 19th centuries). Finally, in the progress chapter, we look at the 20th century—at its moral monsters, like Hitler, and its moral heroes, like Martin Luther King.

WHAT YOU WON'T FIND

You might notice from the sketch above that my telling of the story is very Western focused. This is emphatically not because "West is best". It's not. As we travel along, we will witness some horrendous evils. Even the "successes" are mixed, to say the least. We should also be aware that Christian history is far more global than our telling of it here. Long before European Christianity was a force in the world, the faith had spread south (Ethiopia was

one of the world's first Christian countries) and east (the Byzantine Empire was a 1,000-year Christianised civilisation which, in many ways, outshone its "younger brother" in the West).

Today, Christianity is the most diverse sociological phenomenon the world has ever seen. About a quarter of Christians live in Central or South America, a quarter in Africa and a quarter in Europe, and the last quarter is fairly evenly split between North America and Asia. What's more, its make-up is set to continue a shift southwards and eastwards. For instance, the rate of Christian growth in China has been estimated at 10% per annum for the last 40 years. If that rate continues, there will be more Christians in China than in the United States by the year 2030. Christianity is *not* a Western phenomenon.¹

Why then the Western focus in this book? Two reasons. Firstly, the West has undoubtedly had an immense global impact, for better and for worse (and don't worry—we will look at the worse too). For instance, in my own branch of Christianity, I am part of the worldwide Anglican "communion" (the third largest grouping of churches in the world). All such churches trace their roots

1 "As of 2010, about a quarter of the global Christian population was in Europe (26%), a quarter in Latin America and the Caribbean (25%) and a quarter in sub-Saharan Africa (24%). Significant numbers of Christians also live in Asia and the Pacific (13%) and North America (12%)." The Pew Research Center: *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/christians/>. Accessed 25th October 2021. See also Antonia Blumberg, "China on Track to Become World's Largest Christian Country by 2025, Experts Say," Huffpost, 22nd April 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/22/china-largest-christiancountry_n_5191910.html. Accessed 25th October 2021.

back to the Church of England and its distinctive history, and yet the average Anglican in the world today is a black, teenage girl from Nigeria.² (Nigeria, by the way, contains more Anglicans than Britain has people.) I, growing up in far-flung Australia, and that Nigerian teenager, growing up in Lagos, share a spiritual family tree with roots all the way around the world. To explore Western history is not to ignore global history but to inform it.

The second reason this book has a Western focus is because I'm writing largely to an English-speaking audience (mostly in the UK, the US and Australia). I'm writing about the air I breathe, and I'm assuming it's the kind of air you breathe too. Other atmospheres are available, but if we're going to "focus on our breathing", then we need to begin where we are.

Something else you might notice from the shape of the book is its uneven timeline. Some chapters have a millennium or more to cover, others zero in on a century. That's because my central concern is to communicate the seven values more than to follow a chronology. My background is in philosophy and theology. I'm more of an "ideas" person, and this is a relatively short book. For those wanting to delve deeper, let me suggest some serious works of scholarship that have helped my own understanding:

- For more on equality: *Inventing the Individual* by Larry Siedentop

² *Communities of Faith in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Casely B. Essamuah and David K Ngaruiya (Pickwick Publications, 2014), p 321.

- For more on compassion: *Destroyer of the gods* by Larry Hurtado
- For more on consent: *From Shame to Sin* by Kyle Harper
- For more on enlightenment: *The Light Ages* by Seb Falk
- For more on science: *The Warfare between Science and Religion: The Idea That Wouldn't Die*, edited by Jeff Hardin
- For more on freedom: *In the Image of God* by David Brion Davis
- For more on progress: *Protestants* by Alec Ryrie

To get the larger historical sweep, I recommend, among other books:

- *Dominion* by Tom Holland
- *Atheist Delusions* by D.B. Hart
- *The Book That Made Your World* by Vishal Mangalwadi
- *The Triumph of Christianity* by Rodney Stark
- *Bullies and Saints* by John Dickson
- *The WEIRDest People in the World* by Joseph Henrich

Such historians, scientists and sociologists, whether Christian or not (mostly they're not), reach the same arresting conclusion: our modern, Western values are W.E.I.R.D. Joseph Henrich, one of the authors above, coined the acronym along with other social scientists to describe the peculiarity of our modern assumptions. Our distinctive outlook in the West is a minority report in world history. It has emerged in cultures that are

Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic. What Henrich (and the others listed above) go on to say is that it's Christianity that has made the difference. Unmistakably the WEIRD West has its roots in the Jesus revolution.

At the end of the book there are two chapters reflecting on the implications of all this. Chapter 9 will discuss the position in which the West finds itself. Chapter 10 considers the ways the Bible has charted this course in advance; and then, finally, I draw out some lessons for the “nones”, the “dones” and the “wons” alike.

But first, we begin by visiting that strange country called the past. Let's explore the thoughts and attitudes of the ancient world before the advent of Christianity. From a believer's point of view, there was a long night before Christmas.