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'I could not be more encouraged'
From the Foreword by Tim Keller



PLACE



FOR

PETE
NICHOLAS



GOD

NAVIGATING TIMELESS
QUESTIONS FOR OUR
MODERN TIMES

Pete Nicholas is a pastor at Inspire Saint James Church, Clerkenwell, London, and the author of *Virtually Human: Flourishing in a Digital World* (IVP) and *Five Things to Pray for Your City* (The Good Book Company). After studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Oxford, Pete went on to achieve a Master's in Industrial Relations and a Diploma in Theology (also at Oxford). He is a regular speaker at events and university missions around the country, writes a regular column for *Evangelicals Now* and is a blog writer for Redeemer City to City (New York) and Christians in Sport.

A PLACE FOR GOD

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Navigating timeless questions
for our modern times

Pete Nicholas



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Email: ivp@ivpbooks.com
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Foreword

Just north of Roosevelt Island, New York, where I've lived for thirty-two years, is a place on the East River called 'Hell Gate'. The name is appropriate because, when the tide comes up from the Atlantic Ocean and meets water coming down the East River, it creates violent, dangerous whirlpools and cross-currents. Many ships caught in Hell Gate have come to grief.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that our secular age is not really as secular as advertised, but nor is religion simply marching ahead as in the past. Rather, in our time, both believers and non-believers in God feel strong and sometimes forceful cross-currents or 'cross-pressures'. This means that believers and non-believers are equally likely to be shipwrecked in this Hell Gate.

Believers, of course, are assailed with objections and scepticism from the academy and the media especially, as well as from friends and family. How can a good and all-powerful God allow so much evil? If Christianity is true, how could so many of its followers have been guilty of so much injustice? Why does religion lead to violence? Isn't the Bible filled with regressive social attitudes, historical inaccuracies and contradictions?

However, Taylor shows, non-believers are just as assailed by anxieties and doubts about their own beliefs. They accept what their culture tells them, namely, that intellectually and emotionally mature people don't need to believe in God or the supernatural. But then they find that their secular viewpoint has its own weaknesses when confronting the realities and challenges of human life. The

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secular belief – that the material world is all that exists – generates its own doubts.

There is the secular doubt about morality: ‘Are all moral values really just human social constructions? On what basis, then, can I tell anyone that what they are doing is unjust and plain wrong? Don’t I know, deep down, that some things are truly, objectively evil?’

There is the secular doubt about love and beauty: ‘Are love and beauty really just what my evolutionary neuro-chemistry finds pleasurable, because it helped my ancestors survive? Fish don’t feel out of place in water – so why do I feel that somehow the world *ought* to be a far better place? Don’t I know, deep down, that there is high beauty and joy out there somewhere?’

There is the secular doubt about meaning and hope: ‘Is it really true that eventually everything I do (and everyone has ever done) will be extinguished in the death of the solar system? So that ultimately it makes no difference whether I live a good or cruel life? How do I avoid a sense of radical insignificance? Don’t I know, deep down, that I *am* here for a purpose?’

So, paradoxically, we live in an age in which both believers and non-believers in God struggle with doubts about their basic beliefs about life and the nature of the universe.

Most books written by Christian authors addressing this contemporary situation look only at the problems that Christians believers face. They answer the doubts that challenge believers. Such books are important and I wrote one of them myself! There is, however, a great dearth of books that honestly and practically address the doubts and difficulties that secular, ‘no religious preference’ people face.

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Charles Taylor himself, in his magisterial *A Secular Age*, takes this path. He knows the problems of those who follow the secular way and he respectfully points them out. But his work is scholarly and therefore inaccessible to most readers. The same is true of a number of other thinkers who, over the past thirty years, have begun to recognize these secular doubts and difficulties. We need books, then, that not only listen to the everyday experiences and problems of modern people, but that also draw on the best recent scholarship as well as ancient biblical wisdom in order to address these issues in an understanding, accessible, but challenging way.

Peter Nicholas has written such a book. He uses both his academic training and his pastoral experience to address the deeply felt tensions that young people feel in secular society today. While evidencing the breadth of his background reading, he writes in an easy-to-read and practical way that sympathetically helps readers to think through and wrestle with the perennial, unavoidable Big Issues of human life – truth, morality, happiness, identity, hope – and shows a way forward for all who are struggling.

I could not be more encouraged by Pete's book. We need an entire movement of writers and thinkers who, like Pete, can distil the wisdom of the far past and also of the more recent work of philosophers, theologians and social scientists, to help people navigate the cross-currents of our secular age. If you are looking for someone to help you address the unprecedented challenges people face today to find community, a meaning that suffering can't take away, a hope that endures lifelong, and a secure and resilient identity – start here.

Tim Keller

As a society we find ourselves with a dull ache of regret, looking around for something that we need but can no longer find.

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A place for God

Marie Kondo, the Japanese ‘organizing consultant’, is a guru for decluttering your life and she is big business, particularly now in the West. It makes sense that, with the excesses of consumerism, we might need someone to help us deal with all the clutter we accumulate. I myself have an affinity with the desire to tidy up and rationalize your life. My wife, Rebecca, and I often joke that she is a ‘leaver’ and I am a ‘putter’; she leaves things around the house in ‘useful’ places and I follow behind, obsessively putting them away! And, though we joke about it, a few years ago my desire for decluttering led to the loss of something precious.

Our first son, Oliver, had recently been born and baptized. His birth was particularly special because getting pregnant hadn’t been straightforward for us. Friends and family had kindly sent us congratulations cards, each of which had a special poignance given the wait for Oliver’s arrival. However, in a desire to ‘tidy up’ one day, I threw the cards out. Rebecca came home, immediately noticed them missing and asked me what I had done with them. Realizing my stupidity, I ran out to the communal recycling bin. It was too late: just an hour or so before, the recycling collection had taken place; the bin was empty and the cards were gone. Fortunately, my wife is very forgiving, but she was obviously upset. So was I. I had thrown the cards out thinking we didn’t want or need them any more. Ever since then I have regularly found myself regretting my folly and wishing I could get them back. More recently, I have found myself wondering whether culturally we are experiencing something similar.

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There has been a fair bit of decluttering and throwing out in the realm of ideas, sparked by the period in history that we call the Enlightenment (from the mid seventeenth century onwards). As with any desire for rationalization, it has been a case of getting rid of ideas and beliefs that we no longer feel we need or want, to make space for other things that we do. Superstition has given way to reason. Religion has given way to science. Uniformity has given way to pluralism. Astrology has given way to astronomy, and so on.

Much of this change has been good and important. I think, however, that in some key areas we have thrown out too much and, as with the example of my folly, we are feeling the loss. As a society we find ourselves with a dull ache of regret, looking around for something that we need but can no longer find.

Diagnosing the problem

If you walked in for a medical appointment, the doctor wouldn't blindly guess at a diagnosis; he or she would look at the symptoms to help identify the problem and propose a treatment. The symptoms caused by what we have lost are all around us, but for now let me identify three aspects that I know I have felt in my own life, and I imagine many of you have as well: restlessness, psychological strain and a culture of fear.

First of all, restlessness. Pretty much anyone you ask will tell you that we are busier today than we have ever been. Think of how often you answer the question, 'How are you?' with the answer, 'A bit too busy'. Think of the numerous reports on the increasing levels of stress. In 2018, 74% of people in the UK said they felt 'overwhelmed or unable to cope' and those levels were higher in the younger generations, with 83% of 18–24-year-olds reporting feeling that way.¹ And yet the strange fact is that we *aren't* busier today than we have ever been. The data just doesn't bear it out. The average working week in the

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West was sixty hours at the end of the nineteenth century and now it is nearly half that, thirty-three hours.² And it is not just paid economic work that is decreasing; with ever more labour-saving devices, things such as housework take less time too. Therefore, if we work less than before and have such investment in our rest, why are we so ‘rest-less’? Tiredness may be able to be fixed by a good night’s sleep but restlessness points to our inner life: it’s a symptom of the state of our soul.

Second, psychological strain. There is no doubt now that mental illness is on the rise across the West and it can’t be explained by alleged ‘under-reporting’ in previous generations. For quite some time (at least as far back as the 1930s), researchers have been comparing the incidence of mental illness across generations and these studies show that levels of anxiety and depression are significantly higher than previously and are higher among younger members of our society.³ Add to that the rising rates of addiction across society and the increasing number of things people are becoming addicted to, from shopping to gaming, from pornography to food, and something is clearly very wrong.

Trying to figure out what factors are driving these trends is complex, and of course every case will have its particularities to that person. When considering the wider phenomenon described, however, we do need to consider broader social factors that may be causing it. As one commentator has asked, ‘What greater indictment of a system could there be than an epidemic of mental illness?’⁴

Third, a culture of fear. The opposite of security is fear and, as noted by the sociologist Barry Glassner, we have a ‘culture of fear’.⁵ Glassner reports three out of four Americans feeling more afraid than they did two decades ago and, in a corresponding book focused on Europe, Heinz Bude comments:

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In its substance, too, fear is infinite: fear of school, fear of heights, fear of poverty, fear of heart disease, fear of terrorism, fear of losing social status, fear of commitment, fear of inflation.⁶

Yet both writers argue that the fears are unfounded:

Why are so many fears in the air, and so many of them unfounded? Why, as crime rates plunged throughout the 1990s did two-thirds of Americans believe they were soaring? . . . In the late 1990s the number of drug users had decreased by half compared to a decade earlier . . . So why did a majority of adults rank drug abuse as the greatest danger to America's youth? . . . Give us a happy ending and we write a new disaster story.⁷

And it goes on: health fears when life expectancy in the West is as high as it has ever been; fear of terrorist attacks amidst a generation that thankfully hasn't known a major war and mass conscription; fear of foreigners 'taking our jobs' when in the UK employment is at its highest since 1975 . . . the fears multiply.⁸

None of this is to suggest that there aren't any things to be afraid of. Instead, it is to say that the level of fear is disproportionate to the general level of threat. Consider, for example, this analysis of the recent coronavirus crisis from Lord Sumption, a justice in the UK Supreme Court, and an author and historian writing in the midst of the epidemic:

Fear is dangerous. It is the enemy of reason. It suppresses balance and judgment. And it is infectious. . . . Is the coronavirus the latest and most damaging example? Epidemics are not new. Bubonic plague, smallpox, cholera, typhoid, meningitis, Spanish flu all took a heavy toll in their time. An earlier

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generation would not have understood the current hysteria over COVID-19, whose symptoms are milder and whose case mortality is lower than any of these. What has changed? For one thing, we have become much more risk-averse. We no longer accept the wheel of fortune. We take security for granted. We do not tolerate tragedies.⁹

If you met someone who perpetually suffered from debilitating fear, beyond what is reasonable or normal, what would you conclude? Wouldn't you be concerned? Wouldn't you wonder whether behind the fear lies a deep-seated insecurity? So what should we conclude about our culture?

Putting these three aspects together, restlessness, psychological ill health, and a culture of fear, I wonder if you agree that something is clearly wrong. The examples I have given are not exhaustive, and they aren't intended to be. Numerous social commentators have made similar diagnoses from other related symptoms: polarized and uncivil public discourse, identity politics, racism and the growth of the extreme right and extreme left, the breakdown of community, the erosion of ethical standards and basic morality, increasingly self-oriented materialism, the widening inequalities in the economy . . . I could go on, and I imagine that so could you.

The problems we face are not merely circumstantial, though no doubt circumstances expose them. They are not just confined to a certain demographic within society, though no doubt certain groups feel them more acutely. With these problems bubbling under the surface, it is clear that all is not well. However, as with all diagnoses, there is a danger that we can get preoccupied with the symptoms and miss the root cause. This restless, fearful sense of being ill at ease that pervades much of Western consciousness points us to a deeper problem, a deeper loss that we are struggling to come to terms with.

What have we lost?

Given the title of the book, my diagnosis might not surprise you. I think our main problem is that we have lost God, or, to be more concrete, we have thrown away living with God as a central reality in our lives. After all, if God is God, then he is probably not that easily 'lost'. Equally, I do not just think that we have lost a general idea of 'god', but that, in our desire to declutter and make way for new ideas, we have largely jettisoned the Christian God who has been central to so much of Western society and our perception of the world, ourselves and how we should live.

The poet Matthew Arnold memorably wrote:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.¹⁰

The imagery is poignant. 'A bright girdle (belt)' was once 'furled (wrapped)' around the earth but now the 'vast edges' of the world are grey and exposed to the elements; 'naked'.

The metaphor of the bright belt wrapped around the earth is helpful because it speaks to the way that God is not just a piece of the wider puzzle to be slotted back in, but rather he is the uniting theme of everything, a thread running through all that is and all that we can know, linking everything together and bringing coherence and light.

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Christians have sometimes been accused of proposing a ‘God of the gaps’: as if God is there to fill in the blanks that we can’t understand. According to this argument, as human knowledge advances through science and reason, these gaps are filled in and the need for God diminishes. That is an interesting hypothesis, but it is certainly not the kind of God revealed in the Christian Scriptures. As ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ (Revelation 22:13), he is the God who is ‘all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28). He is depicted in the Bible as uniting everything, binding it together, as if nothing truly makes sense without him and everything ultimately comes from him. Little wonder, then, that if we have lost *this* God, we would be feeling the effects widely and deeply.

Rebuilding our foundations

Today there is an admirable desire to engage in the ‘Big Questions of Life’. You can see it in the enormous success of platforms such as TED Talks and the proliferation of related books and online content. As part of my research for this book, I asked some questions of 442 Christian leaders in various spheres of life who come from the Millennial generation.¹¹ Assuming that they were accurately representing their opinions, when I enquired about the key questions their non-Christian friends were asking, it was notable how these ‘big questions’ showed up time and again.

- ‘Where can I find happiness?’ 46.6% were asking this question.
- ‘How can I reconcile science with religion?’ 41.9%
- ‘Can there be real justice?’ 33.5%
- ‘Where do I belong?’ 32.8%
- ‘Who can I trust?’ 21.3%

With the exception of the question about the compatibility of science with religion, which is a particularly important one for the

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West today, these questions aren't new. Traditionally, every society has cohered around a common set of answers to them. Indeed, a large part of what defines one culture over against another is the way these answers are framed and worked out. They form the 'idea' level, otherwise known as the 'metaphysical' level – the foundations that underpin every culture. For any society, having a degree of consensus on these questions gives a sense of stability and coherence. I am suggesting that the reason we feel destabilized today – restless, under strain and fearful – is that these foundations have been eroded. And that in jettisoning God from our beliefs, the central idea that held these foundations together in the West for hundreds of years has been removed and the resulting cracks are getting wider and deeper.

This is why there is such a keen interest in engaging with these issues today. We intuitively know that we need these foundations if we are to flourish individually and as a society, and so we are searching for answers. As someone who has studied for degrees in philosophy, applied sociology and religion, I have spent a lot of my adult life grappling with them and speaking and writing about them. And yet these questions are not confined to the area of academia. If we are to rediscover the stability and coherence that enable us to flourish in life, then we need to start grappling with these questions again rather than accepting that there are no fixed answers to find. With this in mind, these questions will form the core chapters of this book.

Seeking what we have lost

My father-in-law is an architect. He tells me that London is the most difficult and expensive place to build in on earth. Largely, it is to do with the challenges of laying good foundations. Tunnels for the Tube, Victorian sewers, strange bedrock (particularly around the Thames)

and even a series of tunnels that only get used by the Royal Mail all provide challenges to laying the foundations that are needed to build. Where I live, near City Road – that iconic thoroughfare that runs through central London – there has been an explosion of high-rises in just the last few years, brought on by recent advances in the technology of laying foundations. What always surprises me is that the foundation stage of the build seems to take the longest. For months the hoardings are up around the site and there is a lot of noise but no sign of any progress. Then, seemingly in a much shorter length of time, the buildings spring up.

Similarly, part of what we have started to do – and what we will continue to do if you will join me on this journey – is to drill down and excavate our own foundational beliefs so that we can re-lay them and build. If the analysis above has been a little unsettling, you may well be seeking to avoid it. ‘Are we really restless and fearful? Surely describing the West as having something deeply wrong with it is a bit over the top? Are we *really* building without foundations?’ It is said that ‘the hardest thing to give is in’, and as human beings we do tend to resist the facts when they are challenging. This process is never particularly comfortable, but ask any architect and they will tell you it is essential.

I am aware that a majority of people in the West will respond to my proposition that we need to put God back at the centre of our lives with a number of objections. To be candid, I had many of these objections myself when, as an adult who wasn’t a Christian, aged twenty, I first seriously engaged with Christianity. I was fortunate enough to have good friends who were patient enough to stick with me as I read, discussed and grappled with my objections and the many related questions that were thrown up. Part of my endeavour, therefore, over the coming chapters, will be to seek to deal with a

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number of these common objections as we explore the wider issues to which they are related:

- Hasn't science disproved Christianity or at least rendered it redundant? (We shall be looking at this question in chapter 1, 'Origins').
- Is the Bible credible? Isn't claiming to have 'the truth about God' exclusive and arrogant? (Chapter 2, 'Truth').
- Why do we need God to tell us what is right and wrong? (Chapter 3, 'Morality').
- Isn't Christianity excessively restrictive and therefore doesn't it deprive us of happiness? (Chapter 4, 'Happiness').
- Isn't Christianity repressive and an affront to my personal autonomy? (Chapter 5, 'Identity').
- Aren't the claims about Jesus part of a myth, made up and ultimately unbelievable for us today? (Chapter 6, 'Hope').

We should always welcome questions. There is an important premise underpinning freedom of speech: if something is true, it will stand up to scrutiny, and if it isn't then isn't it beneficial to show it to be false? That being said, you will know as well as I do that there is a form of questioning that is constructive, coming from a place of curiosity and a genuine desire for engagement. In contrast, there is a type of questioning that is blinkered and destructive, merely seeking to confirm an existing bias. One of the few things I would ask of you as you read on is that you seek to adopt the constructive mode of curiosity and engagement as we explore together what we may have lost.

Three of Jesus' most enduring parables are the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost (or Prodigal) Son (you can find them in Luke's Gospel, chapter 15). In all three parables that which was lost, a sheep, a coin and a son, are found again and restored.

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In all three there is great joy at the restoration. Ultimately that is my hope for all of us, that by engaging with these big questions, examining our foundations and rebuilding where necessary, we will rediscover the vital place God occupies in the world and this will lead to much joy and a restoration of our society.

WHERE ARE YOU?

Today, your favourite maps app will give you your location down to a greater level of detail than ever before. But do you really feel like you know where you are?

Major cultural shifts over the past generation have left us feeling disorientated; constant connection has left us feeling dislocated. And many of us are searching for something we can't seem to find. Could the problem be that we have lost a place for God?

Pete Nicholas invites you to explore the big questions asked by each generation, from those of origin and identity to happiness and hope. In *A Place for God*, he argues that by reinstating God's centrality in our lives we can find a sense of rootedness and peace and the answers we've been looking for.

WITH A
FOREWORD BY
**TIMOTHY
KELLER**

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