



# **AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN LIVING**

**Rediscovering the Sacramental Imagination**

**GAVIN BROWN**





Sample

# Testimonials

This book is an excellent and engaging work on rediscovering the presence of the divine in and through the natural world. It is well written, and the many examples employed makes accessible to the reader the constant connection between our natural, scientific worldview and the graced worldview that is foundational to Christian life. Both worldviews are honoured and Brown weaves them together in a clear and masterful way. At a time when people are searching for the 'more' in their lives this book offers a valuable resource for personal reflection and for use in schools and parishes.

— Dr Gregory Brett CM, Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology, University of Divinity

In this new book in the Faith Today series, Gavin Brown asks us to do an important thing: to embrace a sacramental way of looking at life, the universe and everything. He helps us to do this by guiding us to look behind the way the modern world rejects God and the spiritual, and the way the medieval world institutionalised the sacred. He points us to the more ancient way of sacramental imagination in which the immanent and the transcendent are held in tension, as a paradox. This has implications for how we see the Church, how we participate in civil society and for our relationship with the created world. Gavin Brown teaches us that when we come again to see the divine flame burning at the heart of all reality, we will have received a gift which transforms how we live in the world. This is truly a gift worth receiving!

— Revd Dr Ross Fishburn, Academic Dean, Yarra Theological Union, University of Divinity

Gavin Brown's book is not only very helpful and readable but indicates the importance of the sacramental practices of the Church for shaping one's Christian life. It importantly explains that these, when appropriately understood, should influence how we understand the entirety of the world as God's beloved gift. Here the 'sacramental imagination' is of vital relevance to questions of, for instance, how to relate justly to refugees, to demands for commitment to one's home nation, to matters of war, to the liveability of environmental conditions, and so on.

— John C McDowell, Professor of Philosophy, Systematic Theology, and Moral Theology, and Associate Dean, Yarra Theological Union, University of Divinity

As a teacher of Religious Education students often ask what it means to live a Christian life in the 21st Century. In today's contemporary world the term Christian can have many negative connotations and this is a concern for our young people trying to live a good life and transform their world for the better.

*Authentic Christian Living* offers a deep, reflective and spiritual understanding of a way of living that empowers us to respond to the needs of the times. Most poignant is Dr Gavin Brown's focus on the environment, relevant today as the environment faces its greatest peril in human history. This book offers educators a way to reimagine our Christian response to the needs of society that is contemporary, thought provoking and authentic, not only for educators but also for our young people.

— Josie Dilettoso, Secondary School Religious Education Teacher





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# Introduction

What does it really mean to think and live as a Christian today? Some think that Christianity and today's values will never be reconciled and that the only option for a faithful Christian is to reject an increasingly sinful world. Others think that Christianity must continually adapt if it is to stay relevant. But what if there is a middle way?

This book is written in the conviction that Christianity can thrive in today's fast-changing world, but only if it can show the people of this world how it can bridge the divide between the physical and spiritual dimensions of life. How can it do this?

The answer lies in Christianity's sacramental imagination.



This book explores what ‘sacramental imagination’ is, and how Christianity nearly lost it. Recovering our sacramental imagination is essential if Christianity is to remain vibrant and relevant in today’s changing and increasingly materialistic world. With it, we can navigate our way through today’s world, even as that world challenges our ethics, our values, our fears, our prejudices, and our faith.

## A Simple Definition

What comes to mind when you hear the term ‘sacramental imagination’? While it is probably a new term for many Christians, the word ‘sacramental’ might offer a clue. This is because it is clearly linked to a much more familiar noun, that is, a *sacrament*. Now if you are Catholic or Orthodox, you might think of seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Marriage. Most Protestant churches also have sacraments, but whittle the list down to two, just Baptism and Eucharist. Hence, it would seem, anything sacramental refers to these special rituals that Christians call sacraments.

This is not wrong. However, it gets things back to front. It was only in the Middle Ages that the Church established a set list of seven sacraments. Before this time, the term ‘sacrament’ described a whole range of things, words, and actions which revealed God’s

presence in the world. In the fifth century, St Augustine (354-430), one of the Church’s greatest theologians, who will appear many times in this book, defined the Latin *sacramentum* as ‘a sign of a sacred thing.’

This might strike you as extremely broad – because it is! In fact, Augustine ended up listing 304 sacraments! This included sacred words found in sermons, prayers, and especially scripture, along with many sacred actions like the sign of the cross, blessings, use of ashes, along with water, oil, and bread and wine. If this is how we think of the term ‘sacramental’, *then anything can be sacramental*. Any physical object, any person, any place, any experience, any ‘thing’ at all, can reveal God’s hidden presence and activity in the world.

In this book, we are interested in exploring the radical implications of thinking and living this way. This is why we do not look closely at the seven (or two) individual sacraments. Rather, we are interested in the worldview which they reflect. Which brings us to the second key term: imagination. Why call it a sacramental *imagination*?

.....

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any place, any experience, any ‘thing’ at all,  
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.....







A street art picture of John Lennon

## Two Ways of Imagining the World – John Lennon and Bede Griffiths

In his 1971 hit song ‘Imagine,’ the legendary John Lennon challenged us to imagine a radically different world: no countries, no possessions, no greed, or hunger. Could we imagine ‘a brotherhood of man’? Could we imagine a world living ‘as one’? Is there nothing but the sky above our heads?

Play the song now. Listen to the lyrics. Notice how Lennon worked with the idea of ‘imagination’: not as something wishful or unreal, but something that reflects and expresses our fundamental worldview, our yearning for a better world, and a better way of treating each other.

In the first book of the Faith Today series, *Science and Christianity*, Chris Mulherin uses the analogy of looking through a lens to explain what a worldview really is, and how important it is:

*Imagine that we all ‘see’ through a lens. What we see will depend on the colour of the lens. If we look at the world through a blue lens then everything takes on a blue tint. So, a worldview ‘colours’ the way we interpret the world.<sup>1</sup>*

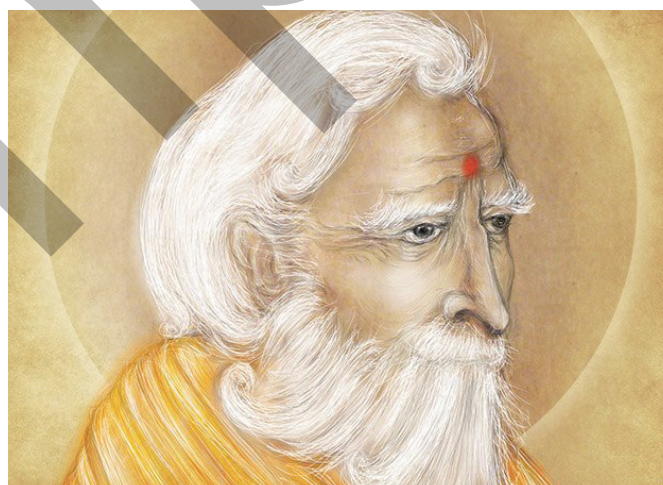
If we see only the sky above us, then that describes the kind of lens that John Lennon was using, and how that colours the way he sees us moving beyond old hatreds and rivalries, old greeds and selfish attitudes.

It describes vividly the idea that to progress, humanity needs to move on to a materialist form of realism blended with altruism and enlightenment. Yet this idea of enlightened rationality is not exactly new: it was born in the seventeenth-century movement that was called The Enlightenment.

This view is echoed in ideas of the so-called ‘New Atheists’ such as Richard Dawkins or the late Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens believed that ‘religion poisons everything.’<sup>2</sup> But one great benefit of the freedom of thought in today’s world is that the modern imagination leaves room for imagining otherwise. In liberal and democratic societies, we are certainly free not to believe but also – we are free to believe.

So, what’s the problem? Why are so many Christians now deserting the churches that used to be the centre of their lives? If, in liberal and democratic societies, Christians are free to be Christian, why do so many who were raised in the vastly varying communities of Christian faith choose not to believe?

To understand the problem, we need to briefly explore how Christians imagine the world differently. Christians believe that God’s presence is with us, wherever we are. The challenge is how we open our eyes to see it. How do we see the world, as God sees it?



Bede Griffiths

Bede Griffiths (1906–1993) was a British Benedictine monk who became well-known for exploring and sustaining dialogue between Christianity and Eastern religions. In his autobiography *The Golden String*, he vividly describes something he experienced as a boy walking home from school one fine day:

*One day during my last term at school, I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or sunset. I can remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had*





*never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all year round and I had never noticed it.*

*As I walked on, I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing, I could not have been more surprised.*

*I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. ... Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.<sup>3</sup>*



In this experience, Griffiths pauses to pay close attention to all that physically surrounds him. In doing so, he notices many wonderful things: the birds singing, the hawthorn trees in full bloom, and a stunning sunset before a 'veil of dusk began to cover the earth.' One does not need to be religious to appreciate the beauty and wonder of nature like this.

But he saw more. Something else seemed to lie behind this stunning moment of natural beauty, something greater still, something that gave him the urge 'to kneel on the ground'. He tells us that he 'hardly dared to look on the face of the sky' – why? Instead of seeing only the sky he discerned rather 'a veil before the face of God'.

This is an example of what we call a sacramental imagination. A modern imagination does not need to see anything beyond the physical and material world; but a sacramental imagination discovers that the physical and material world is part of a greater spiritual reality. Griffiths used the word 'God' for this greater reality, and he realised that *everything* he saw represented 'a veil before the face of God'.

Surely there is no problem here. We can imagine only sky above us as John Lennon does, or see the sky as 'a veil before the face of God' as Bede Griffiths does. Two ways of imagining the world, two choices. However, there is a profound danger facing Christians in a world where one way of imagining is now the dominant one.

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**Bede Griffiths**





## A Great Divide

In 1980, an American television station, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) screened a thirteen-part television series called *Cosmos*. It was a hit. In fact, it is still the most widely watched PBS series in the world. Its writer and presenter was the well-known American astronomer Carl Sagan (1934-1996). Sagan took his audience on a 'ship of imagination' across the vast 'ocean of the cosmos' and its hundred billion galaxies, revealing its awesome beauty, wonder, and our small, though not insignificant, place within it. In words that have become famous, Sagan opened the series by declaring, 'The cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be.'

Sagan's epic series captured the public's imagination because he pushed its frontiers beyond what most of us could possibly, well, imagine! The cosmos is bigger than we ever thought possible. But he also set a clear limit – there is nothing beyond it.

Here, then, is the problem for Christians. We often find ourselves trapped by this modern way of imagining the world. What does this mean? While the spiritual need not be denied, it is nevertheless separated from the cosmos. It becomes something merely added to what is already there as the fundamental reality, which is said to be nothing more than a physical and material reality. Hence, the modern imagination creates a 'great divide' between the physical and spiritual dimensions of life.

This great divide has a potentially devastating impact on

the sacramental imagination: it shrinks. And the implications for authentic Christian living are deeply troubling.

Christians living in the third decade of the 21st century confront a difficult and ongoing challenge. We have to live in this world, where Christian faith has often become merely a personal choice, a private option. For many, God is tacked on to the real-world business of living. Christianity is reduced to an isolated and 'other-worldly' set of beliefs, rather than a radical way of living or discipleship.

For the dwindling few who still go to church, there can be comfort to be found there, a sense of belonging, a routine act of piety and devotion, but little that really challenges the overriding sense of modern individualism. We are told often enough that religion and politics don't mix, and that our moral concerns should be limited to benign charitable endeavours. We are told that science killed faith – even Christian environmental awareness and activism are often understood as secular participation in a very 'this-worldly' cause.

But Christians do not face a stark choice between their Christian faith and modern life. The two worldviews – a modern imagination and a sacramental one – are not inevitable enemies. On the contrary, this book argues that Christians can rediscover their sacramental imagination in ways which revitalises and enhances authentic Christian living precisely in a modern world.

# Outline of the Book

## Chapter 1

In Chapter 1, we explore the sacramental imagination in greater detail, using the story of Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:1-15. Six important moments in the story are identified, with each revealing various characteristics of a sacramental imagination.

## Chapter 2

Chapter 2 focuses especially on what makes a 'Christian' sacramental imagination in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, this expansive sacramental vision would gradually narrow during the Middle Ages and then face the rise of a very different way of imagining the world: the modern imagination.

## Chapter 3

Chapter 3 investigates how Christians imagine being church through the metaphor of Christ's body. How might a renewed sense of 'becoming' the body of Christ assist Christians to respond to an institutional Church in crisis?

## Chapter 4

Chapter 4 investigates how Christians imagine political participation in society through St Augustine's metaphor of the two cities: 'the City of God' and 'the earthly city.' This chapter asks, can Christians take up citizenship in both cities? Or must a 'dual citizenship' be renounced?

## Chapter 5

Finally, chapter 5 investigates how Christians imagine our relationship with the planet through reading 'the Book of Creation.' Who is the author of this book and how do we read it in ways which might address our environmental crisis?

## Overview of Chapters 3–5: The role of the metaphor

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explore how a recovery of the sacramental imagination empowers Christians to respond effectively to specific challenges of authentic Christian living in a modern world. There are many areas of Christian living, so the book focuses on three which possess a particular relevance and urgency today. They are the Church as an institution, society and politics, and how we understand the natural environment, especially considering a planet in peril.

Each of these three chapters uses a rich metaphor within the Christian sacramental imagination to explore its topic. In so many ways, metaphor is the language of a sacramental imagination, as it seeks to discover a deeper spiritual reality found in and through the physical world.

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