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THE STORY OF **GOD**, **THE WORLD AND YOU**

GLEN SCRIVENER

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For you



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WELCOME

'I don't know [what I think about God]. We've never been introduced!'

—Noel Coward

'Come and see.'

—Jesus, John 1:39¹

You made it, well done! So glad you came out, especially at this hour. Let me take your coat. Yes, the signs are shocking around here; people are always missing the entrance. No, that's true, we forget how it looks from the outside. I know ... But you're here now and you're very welcome. What can I get you to drink?

If Christianity is a house, consider this book an exercise in hospitality. I'm inviting you to view Christian faith from within. I'm not interested in throwing stones at the other houses – bashing other belief systems. And I'm not trying to build stepping-stones that take you progressively from your house to ours. Actually I don't think it works like that – I'll say why in a minute. Call me lazy if you like but I'm just going to throw open the doors, stick on the kettle and see who comes.

Don't get me wrong, I don't expect you to *believe* in Christianity as we begin – far from it. I'm presuming you're *not* a Christian and that right now you consider it to be, to some degree, naive, nuts, nasty or naff. That's fine – we pretty much view ourselves that way, if the truth be told. All

I'm asking is that you let me give you 'the grand tour'. Let me show you Christianity from the inside.

As I make this invitation, I realise that I'm asking a lot. I'm aware that the view from the outside can be off-putting.

From the outside looking in

If you've peered into the yard, you've probably seen the household pets – a motley bunch. There's the:

- Labrador Pup Christian: excitable, exhausting, endless enthusiasm but – bless 'em – they seem happy.
- Scared-y Cat Christian: awkward to a fault, serious-minded, scrupulous, petrified of living but, still, they're no harm to anyone.
- Giant Tortoise Christian: ancient, slow-moving, with constantly raised eyebrows and superiority etched in their faces. But if we ever have to endure another Blitz, they'll show the way.
- Ostrich Christian: head in the sand lost in their own world of religio-babble, but it seems meaningful *to them*.
- Bearded Dragon Christian: thick skin, fire in their bellies, thumping their Bibles, praying for Armageddon. But hey, with them around, the rest of us can feel progressive.

I would love to tell you there is no truth to these caricatures. But we all know that caricatures have some basis in fact. Perhaps you have met one or two of these specimens? I've met several. But I assure you that most Christians are not like this. And faith in Jesus does not condemn you to a caricature. It ought to make you more truly yourself. One of the dangers, though, of viewing things 'from the outside' is the danger of stereotyping. If you stay at a distance, you won't understand Christians.

More than this, if you remain 'on the outside', you won't understand Christian beliefs either. Imagine piecing together your knowledge of Christian

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faith using only your Internet news feed. You would be left with more questions than answers:

- Are Christians a majority pleading minority status? Or the other way around? Or both?
- Do they want their morality on the statute books? Or special exemptions for their churches? Or both?
- Do they want freedom of speech for themselves? Or blasphemy laws for the rest? Or both?
- Are their leaders desperately old fashioned? Or desperately trying to be 'relevant'? Or both?
- Are their men distressingly unmanly? Or distressingly anti-women? Or both?
- Are they priggish sex-deniers? Or obsessed by the subject? Or both?

The view from the outside can be confusing, ugly even. And beyond these mixed messages, what is the core of the faith? What comes through the cultural noise? Not a lot. Only arcane views of sex and society and a vague remembrance that somewhere, somehow it has to do with God – whoever God is.

The view from the outside is bleak. And to be honest, if that's Christian faith, I want no part of it. Not only do I find many of the views above objectionable, not only do I cringe at the contradictions in so much Christian communication, I also despair that any of these issues are considered the heart of the matter. In so many cases these issues relate to true Christian faith the way football hooligans relate to 'the beautiful game'. They are distractions at best if you want to understand the thing itself.

This is why I'm inviting you inside. None of those externals get at true Christianity. I assure you, when you enter the real thing, it looks quite different. But actually that's always the way. When it comes to anything important, the view from the inside is your best hope of understanding it.