

## Article

# The Gospel of John and Contemporary Society: Three Major Theological Contributions

David F. Ford

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 9BS, UK; dff1000@cam.ac.uk

**Abstract:** The motives for a 20-year project on the Gospel of John, and the approach taken, are described. Then three major contributions to the twenty-first century are explored: first, the essentials of a Christian worldview; second, who Jesus Christ is, and his presence to readers of the Gospel now; and, third, the spirituality of Christian discipleship as one of learning, loving, and praying, encouraging daring improvisation in the Spirit now. The culmination is the potential of John's wisdom and pedagogy of desire for a wide range of twenty-first century challenges, and an invitation to a Johannine Renaissance today, shaped through the double simplicity of trusting testimony and habitual rereading.

**Keywords:** daring improvisation; deep meaning; mutual love; habitual rereading; Holy Spirit; Jesus Christ; Johannine renaissance; trusting testimony; wise desire; worldview

## 1. Personal Introduction: An Open-Ended Project, a Controversial, Generative Text, and a New Genre of Commentary

In 2000 I celebrated the liberating completion of a nine-year building-related project by beginning a completely different project: a theological commentary on the Gospel of John. I decided that this would 'take as long as it took'—other things could be written in order to fulfil the usual academic expectations of publications, but this would be different: it would have no deadline and would not even need to be completed by my retirement date of 2015. It would seek to be simultaneously alert to John in the context of the rest of the Bible, to the reception of John down the centuries and around the world, and to its relevance today. I would try to read John in conversation with as many and as varied people as possible. And it would try to be the culminating work of my years as a scholar and Christian theologian, both recapitulating my thinking so far and also moving beyond it. I was well aware this was far too ambitious but preferred to fall short in aiming at something that I found inspiring, gripping, and stretching.

I had long wanted to pay fuller attention to the Gospel of John. It is a culminating text in the New Testament, combining much of the Jesus-centred narrative of the other Gospels with many of the rich theological themes of Paul; it has probably been the most influential single text in the history of Christian thought; and it continues to be generative in theology, philosophy, ethics, spirituality, liturgy, the arts, and in mutual engagement between Christians and those who identify with other religions and worldviews.

The commentary was eventually published in 2021 (Ford 2021b). So for the first two decades of this century I was repeatedly rereading the Gospel of John, reading works about it, teaching it, studying it with others, while being actively engaged within the church, the community that this text has helped to form for nearly two millennia. At the same time, I was also attempting to make sense of the current moment in history, which culminated in the COVID-19 pandemic, and to live within it while reflecting on John and contemporary life. This article is an attempt to distil some of the results of those years, with a view to learning how to shape life in the rest of this century.



**Citation:** Ford, David F. 2023. The Gospel of John and Contemporary Society: Three Major Theological Contributions. *Religions* 14: 1357. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111357>

Academic Editors: Andrew Byers, Elizabeth Corsar, Julia Lindenlaub and Kelly Iverson

Received: 30 May 2023

Revised: 10 August 2023

Accepted: 16 August 2023

Published: 26 October 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

In addition to the Gospel of John's historic and current significance, there were other personal reasons—besides the time freed up after the building project—for attending to it. Two of them, which also relate to controversy, are the following.

One concerned Christian relations to the other Abrahamic religions. Since the early 1990s I had been involved in developing the practice of Scriptural Reasoning among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>1</sup> It had become clear that, among Christian scriptures, John is one of the most controversial texts for Jews and Muslims, partly because of its repeated insistence on the divinity of Jesus and its formative role in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. But, for Jews in particular, there is also John's portrayal of 'the Jews' in controversial language, most strikingly in John 8.

Another reason was the result of taking part in the Lambeth Conference of bishops from the worldwide Anglican Communion in 1998. It was a conference that was constructive and fruitful in many ways, but also brought to a head a deep division relating to homosexual practice and same-sex unions. The interpretation of scripture was one of the most contentious issues, and my sense was that the Gospel of John, in which the main body of teaching by Jesus on the night before his death (chps. 13–16) concludes with Jesus praying for an extraordinary vision of unity in love (chp. 17), might have an important contribution to make in resisting divisiveness and inspiring reconciliation.

A rehearsal for the project had come earlier, through five years spent on one of Paul's letters, co-authoring with Frances Young our book, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (Young and Ford 2008). That had given the opportunity to develop a form of biblical interpretation that tries to unite scholarship, hermeneutics, theology, and Christian living today. But that was a set of essays accompanied by our translation of the letter, not a commentary on it.

I found the challenge of writing a full commentary on John was even greater. Fifteen years into the project, this came to a crisis point. In 2015, I had just retired from my post in Cambridge, after giving eight Bampton Lectures in the University of Oxford. I reread all I had written on John since 2000, and reluctantly decided that it would not do. I was wanting it to be both accessible and also sure-footed in scholarship, theology, and spirituality, but it seemed to me to be falling between stools—on the one hand it was aiming at ordinary non-academic readers, but on the other hand it was carrying on academic discussions and disputes, was heavy with footnotes, and did not flow. It felt bogged down in a worthy genre, examples of which were piled up in my study. So, I scrapped all I had written and started afresh.

Would it be possible to do some sort of justice to the Gospel of John in line with my original hopes in 2000? John is *sui generis* in the Bible; it is a Gospel, but distinct from the Synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is both accessible—written in simple Greek and using many widely shared natural symbols and carefully crafted stories—and also profound, challenging readers to go on and on attempting to fathom its inexhaustible depths. And it flows, drawing readers further into its meaning in pedagogically rich ways. This narrative fluidity became much clearer while exploring it in the classroom and also in church and interfaith settings, year after year. From 2015 I experimented with a new commentary style and structure. I tried it out on my wife, Deborah, a priest and psychotherapist, and on my friend Micheal O'Siadhail, a poet (see below). When they both judged that what I was producing more or less worked, I continued in that mode. It follows John's flow chapter by chapter (though not verse by verse); limits footnotes; tries to be accessible to non-academics (while ringing true with academics); offers as much spirituality as theology; and seeks to distil (often in short, italicised sentences) John's wisdom for today.

Does this form of commentary work? Having tried my best, that is not for me to judge; though I have been fascinated by the judgements of others and have taken part in their discussions.<sup>2</sup> But, for the purposes of this article, engaging with John in that way has led me to a clear judgement about this Gospel's three main theological contributions to our twenty-first century world. They are summarised in three sections of the commentary's Introduction under the general heading, 'Why John Now?' (Ford 2021b, pp. 11–24) In what

follows, I will draw on those (in a different order), but also go beyond them, informed both by responses to the commentary and by further reflection on John's meaning for today.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Three Johannine Contributions to 21st Century Culture

### 2.1. Contribution 1: Worldview

The first contribution is to a twenty-first century Christian worldview. The Prologue of John (1:1–18) can be read as putting forward at least three essentials for a worldview that is in line with the New Testament and later mainstream Christian understanding. It leaves a great many things open, and in fact there have been numerous different Christian worldviews inspired by or compatible with the Prologue in the past two millennia, but the three essentials have been remarkably stable. Put negatively, any worldview that rules out one or more of these three is not likely to ring true with most Christians.

The first essential is God as creator of all reality, one result of which is that there is deep, God-related meaning and truth. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people' (1:1–4). Bracketing for a moment the connection soon to be made explicit between the Word and Jesus Christ, that opening is extraordinarily important for the way Christians are called to think. Minds are to be stretched in relation to God and the whole of reality. There can be confidence that there are in reality depths of meaning and truth—the world is not, for example, a random happening, with no sense beyond what we can invent or project. The implications ramify further, ranging from the worthwhileness of seeking to understand how particular events and lives can make sense, to the largest philosophical, theological, cultural, and scientific projects. And 'all people' ensures that all historical periods, age-groups, races, continents, abilities, disabilities, languages, cultures, and religions are potentially within the horizon of Christian thought as it relates to any of them, and to God.

Jumping to the end of the Prologue, a second essential is that God is not only the creator of all things, and source of deep meaning, but is also the deep, personal love at the heart of all this. The 'Son who is close to the Father's heart' (1:18) is the core relationship all through the Gospel of John. It is above all a relationship marked by mutual love (e.g., 3:35; 5:19–29; 15:9–11; 17:20–26). It also reaches out to the whole world (e.g., 3:16). And the purpose of that sending of Jesus is so that those who trust him might be embraced in this love and, in turn, sent in love for others and for the creation God loves.

The third essential is the self-expression and self-giving of God in history. In the middle of the Prologue, immersed in a world of light and darkness, trust and distrust, is the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the embodiment of the deepest meaning and fullest love. He 'lived among us', and the testimony of the author and the community that trusts his testimony is: 'We have seen his glory, the glory as of the only son of a father, full of grace and truth' (1:14). Not only that, this abundance has been shared liberally: 'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace' (1:16). The key events to be told after the Prologue are those of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, and inseparable from that, Jesus gathering, accompanying, teaching, and, after his death and resurrection, sending his disciples as he shares the Holy Spirit with them.

The main concern of the Gospel of John is this double drama—the drama of Jesus, and the ongoing drama of his disciples. These are also, I suggest, the other two main theological contributions of this Gospel to contemporary society, in addition to a worldview that allows for the three essentials of deep meaning, deep love, and God's self-involvement in human history and ongoing life. Any Christian worldview has to be able to allow for all of this, and I will come to the drama of Jesus and the ongoing drama of his disciples below. For now, in line with the interest of this issue of *Religions* in the controversial character of John's Gospel, I note some of the points of conflict between John's and other worldviews with regard to the Prologue's three essentials.

Their controversial character can easily be seen one by one, let alone when taken all together. There is, especially in modern Western culture, a great deal of scepticism about there being deep meaning and truth to be found at all, let alone found in relation to God. Confidence in such meaning has been shaken in many ways, notably through emphasizing human capacities to know with anything like ‘objectivity’ or ‘rationality’. ‘Masters of suspicion’ such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, have combined with appalled observation of the tragedies of human history, and of many ordinary lives, to make any reliable, profound meaning implausible to many.

This is all intensified when not only deep meaning, but also deep love is affirmed to be at the core of our reality. Many who might even be able to affirm some sort of meaning in life, and a rational order of the world, might still resist affirming and trusting the ultimacy of radical and intimate love at the heart of it all.

And even those who affirm both deep meaning and deep love need by no means affirm the particular sort of utter self-involvement and self-giving of God to which the Gospel of John testifies. This vision of divinity and humanity is very surprising news, and there is no alternative to deciding whether or not to trust the testimony to it (the Prologue, and the rest of John’s Gospel, emphasizes the importance of testimony again and again). It is easy in our culture to suspect, discount, ignore, dispute, or reject such testimony.

Those three Christian essentials can be argued about endlessly, and anyone acquainted with the debates in philosophy of religion and related fields, or with what is said about them in more popular discussions, will know that there are no obvious ‘winners’. On all sides of the complex arguments are people who appear to be as intelligent, as educated, as articulate, and as sincerely convinced as each other. Clearly, their differences are unlikely to be resolved through more intelligence, better education, knowledge, or research, more persuasive expression, or greater sincerity and conviction. This by no means implies that the arguments are pointless: for both Christians as well as others, the ability to argue for their positions is intrinsic to their integrity. But it is probably rare for such arguments to be decisive in the formation of a worldview. I suggest that it is far more common for a worldview to be shaped through a wide range of elements, a sort of ‘ecosystem’ that is continually tested, adjusted, and reworked through multiple engagements, and sometimes undergoes transformation in a surprising way. Arguments are of course part of this, but there are many other components in divisions about what ‘rings true’ in a worldview.

For me, faced with the Prologue of John, the most profound and practically important question relating to my worldview in the twenty-first century is whether it is actually possible to have a worldview that not only combines the three essentials of deep meaning, deep love, and the self-involvement of God, but also rings true with key ways in which reality is understood and known in the aftermath of the past few centuries, during which time there have been immense, globally significant, and transformative developments.

As it happened, for ten of the twenty years spent writing the commentary on John I was in intensive, continual dialogue with an original attempt to present a contemporary worldview that rings true both with the Gospel of John and with what has gone on in culture and the arts, in economics, in politics, in the sciences, and in the philosophical, psychological, and theological thinking of recent centuries.

The background is that for over fifty years I have been first reader of the poetry (and some prose) written by Micheal O’Siadhail, and he has been first reader of my theology. In 2008 he began writing his *magnum opus*, *The Five Quintets*, and it was published in 2018 (O’Siadhail 2018). Each of the five quintets includes five long poems (cantos) on a particular theme, which is traced through the centuries, culminating in the twenty-first century. The first quintet is ‘Making’, on the arts—especially literature, theatre, music, and painting; the second is ‘Dealing’, on economics; the third is ‘Steering’, on politics; the fourth is ‘Finding’, on the sciences; and the fifth is ‘Meaning’, on philosophical, theological, and other thinking. So, I was receiving and responding to canto after canto of *The Five Quintets*, while Micheal was receiving and responding to section after section of the commentary on John. The books are, in a way, siblings.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere, in two articles, I have discussed how *The Five Quintets* can be read as an accompaniment to seeking a twenty-first century worldview (Ford 2021a). The key point for now is that it is possible to do justice both to the main thrusts of the Prologue of John's Gospel (deep meaning, deep love, and God's self-involvement in human life) and to the massive developments in thought and practice of recent centuries, while also engaging thoroughly in the profound debates and controversies of the period. John does not prescribe a detailed worldview but can inspire contemporary wisdom-seeking around those three essentials, together with intensive conversation and discussion with those who do not agree with them.

To sum up the contribution of John's Gospel to a twenty-first century worldview: it articulates key elements for any Christian worldview, and also encourages wisdom-seeking in engagement with other contemporary worldviews. This is a task that has been renewed in every generation, and Micheal O'Siadhail's *The Five Quintets* is a contemporary example of doing this.

I would add that, in a world where there is a great deal of religious faith and practice that are foolish, dangerous, offensive, or ignorant (not least in interpreting scriptures), and also a great many responses to the religions that are foolish, dangerous, offensive, or ignorant (not least in interpreting scriptures), it is extraordinarily important to try to enable both scriptural interpretation and the formation of contemporary worldviews to become wiser, more peace-seeking, more gentle and respectful, and better-educated. Our world is complexly multi-religious and multi-secular, with hybrids that are difficult to categorise, and with many deep divisions and conflicts, and it can only be healthily plural if each can draw on depths that are oriented to peace. The Gospel of John can be read as having such depth, with O'Siadhail's worldview as a contemporary outworking of its implications, relevant to 'our desires and orientations, motivations, perceptions, judgements, decisions, habits, and practices' (Ford 2021a, p. 59). A contemporary Johannine worldview can be a sign of hope for the future of humanity and our planet. As the distinguished American interpreter of Irish literature, Richard Rankin Russell, writes about *The Five Quintets*: 'I am increasingly convinced it is the most important poetic work published since Milton's *Paradise Lost* because it magisterially, yet winsomely, teaches us who we are because of who we have been—and who we might yet become' (Russell 2020, p. 20).

## 2.2. Contribution 2: Jesus Now

'Who are you?' (1:19, 22) is the first question asked in John's Gospel immediately after the Prologue. It is first addressed to John the Baptist, but he redirects it to Jesus, and that is where the main focus stays in every subsequent chapter. Who Jesus is has already been central to the Prologue, and the drama of his life unfolds towards its climax in his last evening with his followers (Chps. 13–17), his arrest, trial and crucifixion (Chps. 18–19), and then his resurrection, his ascension, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the beginning of the ongoing drama of the community of his followers (Chps. 20–21).

Through all this, it is very clear what the main contribution of the Gospel of John to society today is: *testimony to the living Jesus Christ now*. For John, who Jesus was is utterly inseparable from who Jesus is now. The most important truth about life and reality, both then and now, is this person, who says 'I am the bread of life' (6:35); 'I am the light of the world' (8:12); 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25); 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (14:6). He is utterly at one with God; and who Jesus is, his 'I am', is at one with God's 'I am', in God's eternal time. This reaches back before the creation of the world (e.g., 17:5, 24), and forward into the eternal future. But it transcends the linearity of past, present and future—as suggested, for example, in relation to John the Baptist ('This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me, because he was before me."'—1:15, cf. 1:30) and in relation to Abraham ('Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am"'—8:58).<sup>5</sup> This 'I am' is the most lively, deepest, and most relevant imaginable connection between the Gospel of John and life now.

The pivotal event in relation to the ongoing presence of Jesus is the resurrection of Jesus. This ‘God-sized event’ (see [Ford 2021b](#), pp. 394–432) means, besides much else, that the crucified and resurrected Jesus is now present as God is present—loving, trustworthy, free, invisible, and sharing the Holy Spirit. If that is so, nothing could be more important for this or any other period. It is obviously so for those two billion or so people who are followers of Jesus today. Their affirmation of it is also a challenge to everyone else: it is a provocative, astonishing, life-transforming claim about the nature of reality. It stimulates an avalanche of questions that cannot be pursued here. But it also throws a bright spotlight on the New Testament texts that testify to it. How does that work as regards John?

While writing the commentary I was repeatedly struck by the implied status of the Gospel of John in its own eyes, and tried to note this, chapter by chapter. It culminates in John 20. The commentary says much more about this, but I will concentrate here on a few key elements, beginning with the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples in 20:19–23. The author clearly indicates that this is a pivotal event. Not only does the drama of Jesus culminate here, but here too the ongoing drama of the disciples, beyond the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, is launched.

Right from the start of the Gospel, beginning with John the Baptist’s cry, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29), readers are being prepared for the death of Jesus, most intensively in his Farewell Discourses in Chapters 13–17. From Chapter 2, where the author looks ahead to ‘after he was raised from the dead’, readers are prepared for the resurrection of Jesus, most dramatically in the climactic ‘sign’ of the public ministry of Jesus, when he raises the dead Lazarus, and declares, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ (11:25). And from Chapter 1 readers are prepared for Jesus giving the Holy Spirit, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’ (1:33). In his dramatic intervention ‘on the last day of the festival [of Booths, or Tabernacles], the great day’, Jesus ‘cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified’. (7:37–39). By 20:19–23, there has been further anticipation of the Holy Spirit, above all in the Farewell Discourses, and Jesus has been ‘glorified’ through his death and resurrection.

So, when Jesus appeared, risen from the dead, ‘showed them his hands and side’ with the marks of crucifixion, and then ‘breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit”, it is utterly clear that this is where all that anticipation of crucifixion, resurrection and the Holy Spirit culminates. The main strands of the Gospel come together here. The culmination is in this person, the living Jesus Christ, crucified, risen from the dead, and breathing the Holy Spirit; and he directs, inspires and launches a new drama: ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’. (20:21) That ‘as’ has a double thrust, which might be seen as the heart of Johannine spirituality.

On the one hand, the thrust is to send the reader back to the beginning of the Gospel and reread it, asking about Jesus and how he has been sent by the Father. This opens up key themes of the Gospel, such as his relationship with his Father and with the Holy Spirit, his ministry of meaning and truth as the Word of God, the gathering of a community of learners and his ongoing relationship with them, the ways he engaged with diverse people in conversation and controversy, the ‘signs’ of abundant life (water into wine, feeding, healing, raising Lazarus, and more) that he does, his final discourses, and his arrest, trial, passion, death, and resurrection. Such rereading is potentially endless.

On the other hand, the ‘as’ invites readers to apply what is learnt to their own lives and communities. The thrust of the Spirit is not only to draw readers deeper into relationship with Jesus and into learning from him and praying in his name; it is also to send them deeper into the world to which he was sent in love. As he was sent into the ‘darkness’ of his world, so readers now are sent into the darkness of the twenty-first century (darkness in themselves, in the Christian community, and in wider society). Each day is new, no situation

recurs exactly, and the opportunities and challenges are always changing, so living in the Spirit involves continual reimagining, rereading, rethinking, and daring improvisation.

So each thrust calls for continual rereading of John's text, and this is brought home decisively by the rest of John 20. The next event is Jesus appearing to Thomas, who has not trusted the testimony of his fellow disciples to the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. His meeting with Jesus has two key elements relating to how we today can read the text of John.

First comes his cry, 'My Lord and my God!' (20:28) This is the climactic theological statement of John's Gospel, with immense implications. Jesus is God, and present as God is present. For readers, this means that as they read John's text they are in the presence of the one to whom it is testifying.

Then comes Jesus's response: 'Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'. (20:29) The meaning of this blessing is unfolded by the following verses, in which John directly addresses future readers: 'But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name'. (20:31) It is a blessing on those—including all of us readers in the twenty-first century—who have not seen Jesus but can read and trust this testimony. Through this text, read in the presence of the one it tells about, we are invited to meet him and 'have life in his name'—in John's terms elsewhere, to 'abide'<sup>6</sup> in him, in mutual indwelling.

### 2.3. Contribution 3: Ongoing Drama in the Spirit

The third major contribution of John today is to shaping the ongoing drama of his followers as they are inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This is inseparable from the other two contributions. As has just been discussed, the giving of the Spirit by Jesus is accompanied by him summing up their vocation ('As the Father has sent me, so I send you') in a way that integrates the double thrust of, on the one hand, going ever-deeper into relationship with himself and into understanding his life and mission, and, on the other hand, going together lovingly, daringly, and more and more deeply into engagement with the world God loves. So the second and third contributions are integral to each other. And those two are in turn integral to the Prologue's worldview.

The massive challenge for us now is how to appropriate all three contributions in our cultural moment, and that is what I turn to in conclusion.

## 3. Appropriating the Contributions in Our Cultural Moment

The horizon of God and all reality opened up in the Prologue, and its articulation in terms of deep meaning, deep love, and the personal involvement in human life of God in Jesus Christ, is a framework for understanding that invites continual rethinking and reimagining in one setting, period, culture, and civilization after another. This is especially important in the ongoing drama of the twenty-first century, which needs a worldview that can do justice both to the transformative developments of recent centuries and to the massive global challenges of our own century.

I want to do three things in conclusion, each briefly and in summary form.

First, I will name just a few of the twenty-first century challenges, each shot through with controversies, to which I see the Gospel of John making a contribution.

Second, I will outline a big hope: for a Johannine renaissance among Christians (and, I would also hope, with fruitful implications for many others too) in the twenty-first century.

Finally, I will reflect on two text-related elements in the ongoing drama: trusting testimony, and habitual rereading.

### 3.1. Identifying the Challenges

'I desire. . .' (17:24) says Jesus in prayer to his Father on the eve of his death. This astonishing prayer (which for me is the most profound chapter in the Bible, and prophetically relevant to our century), expressing his ultimate desire, brings to its greatest intensity a

theme that is there in the first words of Jesus to his first disciples: ‘What are you looking for?’ (1:38) The whole Gospel can be read as an education of desire, and that opening question is followed through chapter after chapter, drawing readers more and more fully into who Jesus is and what he desires. The climax comes after his resurrection in his question to Mary Magdalene, as she weeps and searches for his dead body: ‘Whom are you looking for?’ (20:15)

Is anything more desirable for how we should live in the twenty-first century than wise desire? The prayer of Jesus in John 17 culminates in his most embracing and radical desire for us: for our unity in love with God and himself, and with each other, for the sake of the world—all people and all creation—that God utterly loves (see Ford 2021b, pp. 345–53). The greatest challenges of our century, such as climate change, and economic production and consumption that exhaust and destroy our environment; injustice and massive inequality; divisions over matters of information, free speech and public truth; or conflict and violence related to religion, ideology, race, sex, class, nation, or money: all are bound up with our individual and collective desires, passions, priorities, and purposes.

Just as O’Siadhail in *The Five Quintets* tried to learn from recent centuries how to have a wise twenty-first century worldview, so his more recent poetry has been facing such current challenges, and I was responding to it as he was responding to the later parts of my commentary on John. He was especially tackling the environmental crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ways in which our societies are being shaped by how those in control of electronic media and data accumulate immense wealth, knowledge, and power. It is no accident that his collection of poems on these themes is entitled, *Desire* (O’Siadhail 2023). Nor is it coincidental that his other recent volume, *Testament*, includes 150 new psalms, and retellings of Gospel stories (O’Siadhail 2022). Again and again the Gospel of John resonates with the poems in these two collections. They are vivid examples of how John can continue to inspire prophetic, life-shaping wisdom now.

### 3.2. Calling for a Johannine Renaissance

In 2017 Paul Cefalu published *The Johannine Renaissance in Early Modern English Literature and Theology* (Cefalu 2017). Cefalu found that the Gospel and Letters of John inspired in early modern England a deep, creative response to the transformative yet often traumatic events of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation in Europe. The Johannine response happened in diverse ways across the full range of Christian traditions and groups, and it embraced literature and the arts, ethics, politics and economics, church life and national life, spirituality and theology.

Whereas the Reformation engagement with scripture (often centred on Paul’s writings) had been very controversial and conflictual, John (while still provoking a good deal of controversy) was found to offer a more peace-oriented alternative, and a centring on Jesus, on love, on spiritual depth, and on reconciliation that still rang true with Paul, but also helped to heal the wounds of division and concentrate on essentials that were widely shared. It was, of course, a patchy and imperfect renaissance, but what Cefalu shows is the immense potential in turning to John’s Gospel at a time of radical change, disruption, multiple crises, anxiety, and fragmentation.

Spending the first decades of the twenty-first century studying, thinking, praying, and trying to live the Gospel of John (alongside much else!) in the church and the world has convinced me that what Cefalu discovered in early modern England can act as an encouragement to us now to explore a ‘Johannine Renaissance’ as a wise Christian response to life today. I see it involving a passion for Christian unity in love centred on who Jesus is, and extending to the whole of humanity and creation: centred in Jesus, sent together in love.<sup>7</sup> It is an invitation into discipleship that involves three core ongoing practices (as described in wave after wave of teaching by Jesus in his Farewell Discourses): learning, loving, and praying. It encourages thoughtful and imaginative improvisations on how Jesus was sent in love for the world, alert to his surprises now.<sup>8</sup> And much, much more, as our desires are inspired by the desires of Jesus.

That is a big hope, but at its heart is a double simplicity, open to anyone, and to any group, community, or network, wanting to begin to take part in a Johannine renaissance now, and continue it daily.

### 3.3. John and the Cultural Practices of Trusting and Rereading

The double simplicity is trusting and rereading.

I remember Susan Hylen, whose writing on John I find among the best happening now,<sup>9</sup> saying to me that she advises her students to translate *pisteuein* in the first instance as 'trust', because in our culture that best catches its meaning. It also embraces 'believe' and 'have faith in' but trust in particular points to its utterly fundamental relationship with love. Why is *pisteuein* so crucial in John? I think the key is in the desire of Jesus for love that is mutual. One-way loving can happen without trust between people, but not mutual love. The whole of John's Gospel is an appeal to readers to trust this testimony as the way into a relationship of trust and love with Jesus.

The deepest desire of Jesus, as it pours out in his prayer in John 17 on the eve of his death, is for this coming together in trust and mutual love. The climactic initiative of Jesus on the cross is to create an ongoing community of trust and love, family and more than family, male and female: 'When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home'. (19:26–27)

Trust cannot be forced, but can be invited and inspired. In John, the death of Jesus is above all understood as an act of attractive love that inspires trust in him. 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. . . Trust in God, trust also in me. . . No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. . .' (12:32–33; 14:1; 15:13). The trust at the heart of such relationships as mother-child, teacher-disciple, God-believer, friend-friend, is the mystery of free response and commitment that Jesus above all desires to enable. Each such relationship is tragically vulnerable to the refusal of trust, the distortion of trust, the betrayal of trust, and to our desires being distracted, attracted elsewhere, misled, seduced, or simply prioritising something or someone else. Jesus, too, was and is vulnerable to all this: 'So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish [*thelete*, desire] to go away?"' (6:67). And when John sums up the purpose of his Gospel, he writes of his desire to enable trust: 'But these are written so that you may come to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through trusting you may have life in his name'. (20:31)

The final point is the role that the text of John can play in that ongoing 'life in his name'. It has, as has been remarked, the capacity both to introduce readers to Jesus in an accessible way and also to be inexhaustibly rich and nourishing for those who have reread it many times. I decided, as I reread it time after time in the course of writing about it, that what I most wanted the commentary to do was simply to encourage people to become habitual rereaders of this text, so that they too could experience the astonishing superabundance it offers. As Margaret Daly-Denton, in her superb Earth Bible commentary, *John: Supposing Him to Be the Gardener*, writes, 'This is a text that calls for re, re and re-readers', and she quotes Ingrid Kitzberger, "Blessed are those who read and re-read the Gospel and believe" (Daly-Denton 2017, p. 10). Reread and trust!

Rereading this text is a practice with endless possible ramifications. At its heart is the desire to pursue further and further what I have called the double thrust of Johannine spirituality: going deeper into relationship with the living Jesus Christ, whose 'I am' is the core reality both of the text and of our reading it in his presence; and living life now in his name, breathing his Spirit, as we are sent into the world in vulnerable and daring love as he was sent.

Who knows where this might lead? John sets no limits to the abundant life, truth, peace, love, and glory to be found by trusting the testimony given in this text, or to what this might mean for the world God loves. Nor is there a limit set to the vulnerability of

being sent like this in a world like this. The final chapter of John realistically points to key elements in the ongoing drama of the community committed in trust to following Jesus: doing what Jesus says; trusting and giving testimony; gathering for a meal in his presence; engaging intensively with him in love, one to one; taking on community responsibilities; being willing even to die to ‘glorify God’ (21:19); but also being willing faithfully to abide long term, and ‘testifying to these things’, if that is the desire of Jesus (21:22–24).

Then comes the final note about writing books: ‘But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that could be written’. (21:25)<sup>10</sup> I close with a practical suggestion given by what I have found to be one of the best books written about what Jesus did and what he has continued to do.

In the introduction to his book, *The Scaffolding of Spirit. Reflections on the Gospel of John*, Alan Ecclestone writes: ‘One purpose has shaped this book. It is a plea for learning to read the Gospel according to St John with the kind of attention that can best be described as praying it. In doing that, I believe, we come nearest to the mind and intention of its author. In that way we latch on to what he himself did. He wrote that others might join him. I hope to suggest some ways of setting about it. Here I simply remind myself that it calls for selfless attention, unwearied patience, passionate commitment, honesty of purpose, hunger for truth. Reading in this way is not foreign to Jewish and Christian traditions of prayer. In just such deliberate fashion Torah was studied and Psalms were recited from time immemorial. They will go on being used in that way for generations to come. My plea is for doing that kind of prayer-reading of the Fourth Gospel. It would be like turning it into a Christian Psalter. Such use of it is greatly needed and long overdue’.<sup>11</sup>

At the back of the book there is an appendix with a table dividing the Gospel of John into 90 days of readings, so that one, or more, can read it continually every three months. It is hard to think of a more fruitful core practice for a Johannine renaissance.

John is a Gospel designed to invite readers to read (or hear) their way into meeting Jesus, trusting Jesus, and maturing in their relationship with Jesus and with each other through habitual rereading in his lively, loving, and often surprising<sup>12</sup> presence.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Up to that time it had not yet spread, as it has now, to engaging with the texts of other religious traditions, including Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, and Daoist. On Scriptural Reasoning, see (Ford and Pecknold 2006). For a vivid account of what goes on in a typical session, see (Higton and Muers 2012, chap 9). For the most comprehensive book so far on Scriptural Reasoning, written by its leading co-founder, see (Ochs 2019). See also the website [www.scripturalreasoning.org](http://www.scripturalreasoning.org). (accessed on 25 October 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> The commentary’s genre was one of the main topics of discussion during a panel on it at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature in Denver. Two of the contributors, Professor Laura Holmes and Professor Katherine Sonderegger, offered lively and very different responses on the genre of the commentary. Their responses, and my response to them, will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies*, November 2023, together with other responses.
- <sup>3</sup> Some of what follows was part of the 2022 Costan Lectures delivered in Virginia Theological Seminary, entitled ‘The Wonder of Living: A Johannine Renaissance in the Twenty-first Century?’.
- <sup>4</sup> The theological commentators to have noted this most explicitly so far are Iain Torrance and Katherine Sonderegger. Professor Torrance in his cover endorsement of the commentary writes: ‘Though steeped in the range of classic theology, [Ford’s] most immediate dialogue partner is the Irish poet Micheal O’Siadhail’. Professor Sonderegger, in her panel response to the commentary (see above note 2), opens with a substantial quotation from the vision of God in the final canto of O’Siadhail’s fifth quintet, and then writes: ‘O’Siadhail’s vision of an illumined wood is distinctly Dante-like yet distinctly his own. And, in a lovely collaborative way, I think this distinctive vision mirrors the themes of David Ford’s rich and richly spiritual reading of the Gospel of John’. At

the end of her response, having explored a range of genres for their similarities and differences in relation to the commentary's genre (patristic and medieval commentaries; post-liberal readings of scripture, as by Hans Frei, who was one of my teachers in Yale; and lyric poetry as commentary) she returns to *The Five Quintets* and Dante: 'But even here I must register my own dis-ease with this last candidate [lyric commentary] for membership of Ford's commentary. For the dramatic narrative of Dante's *Divine Comedy* cannot be overlooked. O'Siadhail's evocation of Dante is too close, too redolent of the shape and impulse of this commentary, to be further delayed. In some ways, perhaps the genre that captures best Ford's singular work is Comedy: this is a commentary that leads to the glorious vision of the Spiritual Oneness of the God of love. It is a happy ending, indeed the only true, everlasting happy ending in this cosmos of ours. The focus of Ford's commentary, as of Dante's *Commedia*, is the dramatic narrative of the Divine Love. . . .'

- <sup>5</sup> On the fascinating topic of time in the Gospel of John see Ford (2021b), *The Gospel of John*, index references to 'life, eternal' and 'time', especially the discussion on pp. 340–41: 'The Johannine concept of time (covering topics such as past, present, and future, eternity/eternal life, preexistence and "time" before creation, eschatology and apocalyptic, preresurrection and postresurrection perspectives, the fusion of temporal horizons, the "hour" of Jesus, the maturing of faith, the narrative shaping of time, time and ethics, and the relationship to time of the person of Jesus and the Holy Spirit) has been the subject of much fruitful scholarship and theological reflection, well summarized and assessed by Ruben Zimmermann and Catrin H. Williams. Zimmermann (2018) analyzes this Gospel's "carefully thought out concept of time" and its "highly reflective and intentional processing of the past" (pp. 292–93) and describes something important throughout the present work, how "the Gospel itself thus becomes a medium for opening up the future" (p. 297), and why the temporality of this "turbulent text" eludes complete understanding (p. 304). Williams (2018) perceptively reflects on two further key elements of the present work: the relational aspect of both faith and eternal life; and their many dimensions, "embracing the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine, the present and the future" (p. 354)'.  
<sup>6</sup> There is a deep interconnection between mutual abiding, internalising the words of Jesus (and, of course, John's text), and desire expressed in prayer, as in the central text on abiding, the parable of the vine: 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish [*thelēte*, desire], and it will be done for you'. (15:7).  
<sup>7</sup> For more on this see (Ford 2022, pp. 414–28).  
<sup>8</sup> Sonderegger notes 'a singular motif in Ford's reading of the Risen Christ: He is the One who continues to surprise us. The comedic life of the victorious Christ continues the drama of creatures in their pilgrimage into the Triune intimacy of love. Christ cannot be contained or constrained; He cannot be anticipated or domesticated; He will impel a fresh discipleship at every age, and He will remain the loving and gracious Lord of the whole. . . .' (See note 2 above).  
<sup>9</sup> For more details, please see (Hysten 2005, 2009) and (O'Day and Hysten 2006).  
<sup>10</sup> For my interpretation of this verse see (Ford 2021b, pp. 429–32).  
<sup>11</sup> London, DLT 1987, p. 2.  
<sup>12</sup> See note 8 above.

## References

- Cefalu, Paul. 2017. *The Johannine Renaissance in Early Modern English Literature and Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daly-Denton, Margaret. 2017. *John: Supposing Him to Be the Gardener*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Ford, David F. 2021a. Seeking a Wiser Worldview in the Twenty-First Century: Micheal O'Siadhail's *The Five Quintets*. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 110: 213–30. [CrossRef]
- Ford, David F. 2021b. *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Ford, David F. 2022. Mature Ecumenism's Daring Future: Learning from the Gospel of John for the Twenty-First Century. In *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning: Walking the Way to a Church Re-Formed*. Edited by Paul D. Murray, Paul Lakeland and Gregory A. Ryan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 414–28.
- Ford, David F., and Chad C. Pecknold, eds. 2006. *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Higton, Mike, and Rachel Muers. 2012. *The Text in Play. Experiments in Reading Scripture*. Eugene: Cascade Books.
- Hysten, Susan. 2005. *Allusion and Meaning in John 6*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Hysten, Susan. 2009. *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Ochs, Peter. 2019. *Religion without Violence: The Practice and Philosophy of Scriptural Reasoning*. Eugene: Cascade Books.
- O'Day, Gail R., and Susan E. Hysten. 2006. *John*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- O'Siadhail, Micheal. 2018. *The Five Quintets*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- O'Siadhail, Micheal. 2022. *Testament*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- O'Siadhail, Micheal. 2023. *Desire*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Russell, Richard Rankin. 2020. Review of the Five Quintets in *Irish Literary Supplement*.
- Williams, Catrin H. 2018. Faith, Eternal Life, and the Spirit in the Gospel of John. In *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*. Edited by Judith M. Lieu and Martinus de Boer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 347–62.

- Young, Frances M., and David F. Ford. 2008. *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers.
- Zimmermann, Ruben. 2018. Eschatology and Time in the Gospel of John. In *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*. Edited by Judith M. Lieu and Martinus de Boer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 292–310.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.