

# The World Next Door

A short guide to the Christian faith



Rory Shiner  
AND Peter Orr

For all our material comfort, the research tells us that we are increasingly fearful, restless, anxious and lonely—and yet we seem strangely reluctant to ask the big questions about who we might really be, and whether anyone really understands, or even if we have any value at all. Rory Shiner and Peter Orr both possess powerful minds and outstanding communication skills, and for those who recognize that there must be more, this book sets out the biblical case for truth, meaning and hope in a fresh and compelling fashion.

**The Hon John Anderson AO FTSE**

Former Deputy Prime Minister of Australia

In a world that is often battling to find purpose and build self-worth in the midst of unpredictability and change, *The World Next Door* is a chance to pause and reconsider the framework through which you see life. Rory and Peter invite us to see the bigger picture of life outside of our own personal bubbles, and the reality that we are meant for more... and part of more than we realize. They beautifully unpack the Christian faith through the Apostles' Creed in a real-life way, and compel us to consider the life that God offers us through Jesus as they bring depth and clarity to each aspect.

I pray that many who read this book will have their eyes and hearts opened to the truths offered by the Christian faith.

**Debbie Flood**

Team GB Olympic silver medallist

Interesting. Personal. Challenging. These are some of the words I would use to describe *The World Next Door*. In a world that has forgotten the truth about God, we need to hear it in a way that makes sense. By explaining the basics of Christianity, Rory and Peter invite us to learn the most important things of all.

**Peter Jensen**

Former Anglican Archbishop of Sydney

*The World Next Door* is a refreshing engagement with philosophy, books, film and personal experience to explain what the Christian faith is all about. Intriguingly set within the framework of the oldest and most widespread Christian creed, the book introduces us not to what we might have expected—the flawed institutional church—but to the God who created the universe, and to his Son, Jesus of Nazareth, who entered our messy life to rescue us mostly from ourselves. It is, in many ways, a love story. This is not a book full of trite one-liners. Instead, it sets out the kind of thoughtful, respectful arguments that its readers deserve.

**Anne Robinson AM**

Founder and Partner at Prolegis Lawyers

Co-author of *Driven by Purpose: Charities That Make a Difference*

This little book is sheer genius. Its lively, bracing exposition of the ‘basics’ of Christian faith is engaging, surprising and delightful. Rory Shiner and Peter Orr write with

affection and respect for their readers—especially those who are ‘sceptical’, as they thoughtfully unfold the compelling beauty and deep significance of the things that Christians hold to be true. Their enthusiasm for the subject rolls off every page. *The World Next Door* is relentlessly contemporary in re-introducing to a new generation one of Christianity’s ancient statements of belief. Buy one for yourself and buy three to give away.

**Kanishka Raffel**

Anglican Archbishop of Sydney

# The World Next Door

A short guide to the Christian faith

**Rory Shiner**  
AND **Peter Orr**

 **matthiasmedia**  
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# Dedications

## **Rory**

For my godchildren: Kaitlin, Jonah, Lachlan, Josie,  
Nell, Thomas, Otis, Remy, and Zali.

This is what I would have taught you if I were better  
at being a godparent.

## **Peter**

For Noel Purdy: Thank you for helping me understand  
all of this for the first time.



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## INTRODUCTION

# I believe—the reason for this book

This book is our best shot at commending the Christian message to our friends. It's driven by the universal human instinct to increase the joy of finding a good thing by sharing it with others. We both think we've found a good thing—the best thing—in finding God through Jesus. We want to share it.

I (Rory) work as a pastor of a church in Perth, Western Australia. A large part of that role involves talking about Jesus to people who are secular or from religions other than Christianity. Truth be told, that's probably my favourite part of the job. Peter teaches the New Testament at a Theological College in Sydney. Part of his job involves keeping abreast of the latest scholarship, including all the sceptical approaches that claim to have disproved this, that, or the other in the Bible. So that's handy.

If anything in particular has prodded us to work together, it is our strangely symmetrical upbringings. I was brought up in a deeply religious family, but was sent to a very secular, progressive state school where I was one of a tiny handful of Christians. Peter, on the other hand, grew up doing what was then a rare thing in Northern Ireland—*not* going to church. We are both roughly the same age, and so while Peter was getting teased at school for being

the only atheist in the village, I was having my Christian faith held up to (mainly good-natured) ridicule. For the quote under my photograph in the school yearbook, my classmates ascribed “Something religious”; Peter, meanwhile, acquired the nickname ‘Pagan Pete’. For both of us, the secular alternative to Christian faith has always been part of the air we breathe.

The book was largely written during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021. There’s nothing like a pandemic to remind us of our mortality and frailty. There have been signs, at least at the time of writing, of a new interest in spiritual matters. Google searches for ‘prayer’, for example, went up by 50% during the early phases of the crisis.<sup>1</sup> That must mean something.

Before we go any further, a brief mention of three other books might help to frame where we think this one fits.

Karl Barth (1886-1962) was a Swiss theologian, and a leader in the Confessing Church, a (shamefully small) group of Christian leaders who perceived the evil of Hitler’s regime and refused to submit to its demands. Just after the end of the war, in 1947, Barth returned to Bonn, where he gave a series of lectures on the Apostles’ Creed. These lectures eventually became a book called *Dogmatics in Outline*. Europe was in ruins. The landscape was scarred by the violence of war. Barth wanted to offer new hope from the ancient streams of the Christian Faith.

From 1941 until 1944, CS Lewis, the great Oxford don, author of the Narnia series, and a man once described as the best-read man in England, gave a series of lectures for the BBC on the Christian faith. These were later

published as his now-famous book *Mere Christianity*. War was again the context against which Lewis was invited to commend the Christian message to the British people.

Peacetime and prosperity give us the luxury of squabbling over secondary matters. Effective health care and extended lifespans allow us to ignore the certainty of our own death. But wartime and pandemics tend to concentrate the mind. Certainly, our minds have been drawn again to the central truths of our faith, just as our hearts have been drawn to friends who have not yet considered the claims of Jesus. With Karl Barth, we think the best hope for the future in an uncertain present is the ancient faith of Christianity, as expressed in the stout words of the creed. And with Lewis, we think the task of commending that faith to those who do not subscribe to it is exciting, and urgent.

Karl Barth was a theological giant. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* was an instant classic. We make no such claim for what follows. But inasmuch as both Barth and Lewis were making an earnest plea to a secularizing culture in the midst of a global crisis, we write in the same spirit.

The third and final book to help orient you to this one is less well known. It is a book to which this book's title is an allusion—James Sire's *The Universe Next Door*. Published in 1976, the book is a guide to the beliefs, imaginations, thought patterns, and practices of the person next door, who might be an atheist, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu. As the title indicates, if we could see into the mind of the person next door whose belief is not our own, we would find not just a few propositions on which we disagreed,

such as “God exists”, “demons are real”, or “abortion is permissible”. Rather, we’d find a whole worldview—a way of seeing the world, indeed a ‘universe’—in which those propositions find their coherence and meaning.

Sire wrote for Christians to help explain to them the “universe next door”. He wanted them to think more generously, more expansively, and more holistically about their neighbours’ beliefs. Our purpose here is to return the favour. We want to invite you into the world, the universe, that is the Christian faith.

What follows is roughly shaped around the Apostles’ Creed, the most universally accepted summary of the Christian faith. It is associated with baptism and the entry of new converts into the faith.<sup>a</sup> We figure the creed will keep us on the straight and narrow, tethering us to an account of the faith that is briskly orthodox and historically grounded—the sort of *mere* Christianity Lewis spoke about.

The creed also allows us to take you in and show you around a bit, rather than just standing at the door and talking about what’s on the other side. Christianity’s explanatory power, bracing beauty, and sheer otherness are some of the best things about it. It ends up making our modern, secular, materialistic Western view of life look a bit, well, dull. There are all sorts of good reasons to become a Christian, some of them very serious. But one of the more surprising reasons is that being a Christian is actually really interesting and, in its own way, fun.

a Baptism, practised by Christians in various forms for the last 2,000 years, is a symbolic washing with water, representing the cleansing, the forgiveness of sins, and the new life that Jesus offers.

# The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended into hell.  
On the third day he rose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father  
Almighty.  
From there he will come to judge the living and the  
dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

# Part 1: God

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.**



## But first, demons

Jesus was an exorcist. He once cast a legion of demons out of a man and into a herd of pigs. They ran off a cliff and into the ocean and were drowned. True story.

Most Christian books addressed to modern, scientifically-inclined Westerners don't begin here. The average secular person is unprepared to take such stories seriously. And evangelists have plenty of other material to work with. Who knows? It's even possible the average modern Christian finds these stories faintly embarrassing.

But I propose we start exactly here. Consider it training at altitude. If you're still with us after the demon-and-pigs story, the rest is going to feel pretty sane.

Jesus was many things. He was a preacher, a healer, a storyteller, and a prophet. According to Christians, he is the saviour of the world, the presence of God with us, and God's appointed ruler of the universe.

He was also an exorcist.

Jesus did battle with demons. A lot. In the grand sweep of the Bible, that's unusual. Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible is not wall-to-wall supernaturalism. Vast swathes of the Bible are about historical, this-worldly events. Many of its places and characters can be cross-checked on the historical record.



But then there's Jesus. Despite the Old Testament accounting for about three quarters of the Bible<sup>b</sup> and more than two thousand years of history, the first recorded biblical exorcism is by Jesus. Demons, relatively shy and hidden in the first thirty-nine books of the Bible, are suddenly active, prominent, and anything but shy when it comes to Jesus. Why?

To understand this, we need a map. A map of the unseen world.

At one level, the Gospels (the four New Testament biographies of Jesus) are about our world. Jesus did not live in a time-out-of-mind, in a dreamtime, or in a mythical pre-history. He lived between 4 BC and AD 30, in places such as Galilee and Jerusalem, under rulers such as Augustus and Tiberius, and encountered historical figures such as Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate. Jesus' world was our world.

But in the Bible, our world is not the only world. What we can see with our eyes is not all there is. And, just as the activities of the criminal underworld occasionally interrupt civilian life (the execution of Mob boss Crazy Joe Gallo in a crowded seafood restaurant in Manhattan on 7 April 1972, for example), the spiritual underworld occasionally interrupts our earthly life.

b 'The Bible' is, in fact, a 66-book collection—more of a library than a book. It contains two sections: the larger and longer first section is what Christians call The Old Testament. It tells the story of God's dealings with the nation of Israel. The second, much shorter, section is called The New Testament, which is about Jesus and his followers. When we refer to a Bible book we will cite the name of the book, then the chapter, and then the relevant verses. This way you can easily check the reference, either by typing it into Google, or locating it in a physical Bible. So, for example, a quote from the Gospel of Mark, chapter five and sentence number two, will appear as "Mark 5:2".

The Bible writers map this as a kind of triple-decker universe. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul says that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:10). There are the three decks: (1) in heaven; (2) on earth; and (3) under the earth.

Heaven (the top layer) is God’s space. Heaven is where (in one sense) God ‘is.’ It’s where his angels are. It’s the place from where God rules. You hear this in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, called “The Lord’s Prayer” (or sometimes, “The ‘Our Father’”):

...your kingdom come,  
your will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.

Heaven is where God’s will is done. The prayer is a request to make earth more like heaven, to bring God’s rule (his “kingdom”) from there to here. The Nyoongar version of The Lord’s Prayer captures the idea perfectly: “Your word will come here and be boss on our ground as you do in your holy and sacred home”.<sup>c</sup> Heaven is God’s holy and sacred home.

Earth, the second layer, is our home, our ground. In biblical thinking, we are very much from around here. The first human’s name, Adam, means ‘the dust man’ or ‘the earthling’. We are made of the soil and depend upon it for our lives. Humans are not wayward angels, lost aliens, or eternal souls temporarily encased in meat-suits. We

c The Nyoongar people are the Indigenous people of south-west Western Australia, where I live.

are earthlings. We were made, says the Bible, to be God's image-bearers in this space. We were put here to be a picture to the earth of what God's rule is like in heaven.

Finally, at the third layer, we have the underworld.

In common understanding, there is a place called 'hell'—the place of punishment for the enemies of God. True, that's part of the picture. But in the biblical map, it's part of a wider reality often called 'Sheol' or 'Hades', 'the place of the dead', or simply 'below the earth'.

It's not hard to think how this language came into use. Humans, when alive, live on the earth. When our loved ones die, we bury them. We put them under the earth. And so, 'under the earth' becomes associated with 'where the dead are'.

There you have the biblical triple-decker universe mud-map. The heavens, the earth, and under the earth. God's place, our place, and the place of the dead. That's the map we need.

One more important note: things got badly messed up.

As part of humanity's rebellion against our creator (of which much more below), the whole world has become dis-ordered, dis-integrated, messed up. Things are not as they ought to be, and things are not *where* they ought to be. Just as under conditions of climate change we are starting to find polar bears in odd places, or fish migrating out of their usual regions, or bumblebees dying where they used to thrive, so too, in a world in rebellion against its creator, one of the symptoms is finding spiritual creatures a long way from home.

Creatures such as demons.

In the story where I began, Jesus and his disciples travel

by boat to a place called the Gerasenes. They arrive at a cemetery and there encounter a man who has been possessed by what the Gospel writer calls “an unclean spirit” (Mark 5:2, ESV).

Now, let’s apply our ‘map’ to this scene. Where is the man? Among the tombs of the dead. What has possessed him? An unclean spirit. What’s going on here? It would seem a spirit from the underworld has found its way into our world. There’s been a breach of the border in our triple-decker universe.

Under control of this spirit, the man’s life has been rendered chaotic. No-one is strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs he cries out. He cuts himself with stones. Isolated from his community, unable to be constrained, he is both overpowering and overpowered—a threat to others and to himself.

What is the nature of the force that has assumed control of this man’s life? Demons are popularly assumed to be fallen angels. That would certainly be the majority opinion. But I have an alternative for your consideration. I think they might be ghosts—by which I mean the spirits of dead people.

Three reasons.

First, ghosts are a thing in the Bible (see, for example, the story of the prophet Samuel’s ghost in 1 Samuel 28).

Second, notice the words the Gospels use: “an unclean spirit” or “a demon”. A spirit (one guesses) cannot literally be “unclean”. What would the dirt attach itself to? But uncleanness can also be moral and religious. In the Old Testament, association with death warrants an automatic

red card into the unclean category. And the spirits here *are* associated with the dead. They live, after all, in a cemetery.

They are also called “demons”. In the literature of the time, that word is sometimes used for minor deities or fallen angels. But the word is also used for the spirits of the dead. It is used especially for those spirits of the dead who continue to make their presence felt upon the earth. Often, these are spirits who have unfinished business on earth. Like Hamlet’s father, their death has embedded an unacknowledged injustice, or their burial was irregular, or their cause was unheeded in life. Estranged from their bodies, they now wander the earth looking for a host. Dislocated from their proper home “under the earth”, they now search for a temporary home in a physical place or another’s body. In the Gospels, demons are always looking for a home.

Third, ghosts are a ubiquitous feature of human culture. Almost every human society has an account of spirits of the dead making their presence felt in our world. Who am I to dismiss so much human testimony?<sup>d</sup>

## Jesus versus the demons

Whatever demons are, they are from the underworld, the realm Jesus is confronting. Chapter 5 of Mark’s Gospel records one such moment of confrontation. When a

d At least, that’s what I (Rory) think they are. For the argument in favour, see P Bolt, *Living with the Underworld*, Matthias Media, 2007. I don’t think my co-author is persuaded, and he’s an actual biblical scholar, so factor that into your assessment. Whatever they are, they’re definitely creatures from another realm, which is the main thing we need to know about them.

demon-possessed man sees Jesus from a distance, he runs and falls on his knees in front of him and shouts at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!” (Mark 5:6-7).

Notice the concern to ‘name’ Jesus. Demons have excellent theology. If you ever find yourself sitting a theology exam, quoting New Testament demons is a sure-fire path to a High Distinction. They never put a foot wrong. Here, the spirit names Jesus with precision: “Son of the Most High God.” Snap.

But the demon is doing more than trying to spruik his theological prowess. He is seeking to control Jesus by naming him. In the world of the occult, the world of magic and sorcery, names have power. From traditional cultures to the classical world, through to He Who Must Not Be Named in *Harry Potter*, names are a source of power. To name correctly is to release or to exert power.

Remember the quote before, from the apostle Paul? “At the *name* of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth...” Names matter.

In this context, Jesus’ reply is vaguely comical. He says to the spirit, “What is your name?”

Jesus won’t play the sorcerer’s game. He responds to the attempt to ‘name’ him with aplomb. “What’s your name?” is Jesus’ nonchalant response. (His name, it turns out, is “Legion”, for “we are many”.) The spirits, now cowering before Jesus, beg Jesus to find a new home for them. Homelessness—being away from the underworld in which they belong, or the bodies they once inhabited—is the fear

that drives them. If this man can no longer be our host, then what?

“Send us among the pigs”, they beg Jesus.

Jesus consents and sends them there. And the pigs, now possessed by the spirits, rush headlong into the lake and are drowned. In the ancient world’s map, such bodies of water (lakes, seas, oceans) are seen as a kind of portal to the underworld, pores through which AWOL spirits can return to the world from which they have escaped.

When Jesus arrived, he found a dangerous man and a legion of unclean spirits escaped from below the earth. By the end of the story, the man is seated and in his right mind, and the spirits have returned to the place from which they came. Jesus is putting things back into order: in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth.

## **Demons and the Christian faith**

Starting a book for secular, 21st-century people with demons might look like an own goal or an unforced error. The Bible is not particularly focused on demons, angels, the heavens, or what’s under the earth. For the most part, the lens is firmly focused on our world.

So why start here?

Francis Schaeffer, a Christian thinker from the mid-20th century, apparently used to give his first talk on angels when addressing university students. When asked why, he explained that when he spoke about God and sin, people heard him to be speaking about morality. But when he spoke about angels, people understood he was speaking

about spiritual truths. About a bigger reality, about transcendent truths.

That's what we want to talk about, too. In the chapters that follow, the questions of morality and the good life will find their place against a background of bigger realities: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, together with the heavenly hosts of angels, and the underworld armies of the un-dead. Rather than give you arguments for the existence of such worlds, we'd prefer to simply invite you in, boots and all. On the way through, we'll offer some explanations here, some defences there. But the real explanatory power of Christianity can only be experienced by indwelling it. The Christian faith is less like an object in the world, whose existence is accepted by some and denied by others, and more like a pair of glasses through which you look at the rest of life, the universe, and everything. We think it makes sense. But more than that, we think it makes sense of everything else. Magnificently so.

## **No hell below us, above us only sky**

In the modern West, we live in what philosophers call an "immanent frame". We have framed out transcendent realities, such as God and angels, or the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. We may or may not believe in such things. The point is we have 'framed' them out, much as a picture frame includes the painting and excludes everything else. We have put them to one side and decided to get on with life as if they were not there. Perhaps they are; perhaps they aren't? The point is we don't need them in the picture



to get on with things. No hell below us, above us only sky.

The result? In modernity, we have more freedom than we did before. More prosperity. More opportunities to invent and reinvent who we are. We have been freed from any sense of purpose, of *telos* or proper ends. We don't look beyond ourselves for meaning. We generate meaning from within. The army used to encourage enrolments "For King and Country". Don't think about yourself; think about something bigger. Today, the army invites us to 'be your best self'. Our identities are fluid and malleable. We no longer look outside ourselves for fixed points from which meaning can be established; we look inside, and seek to discover the authentic self within. The most trustworthy voice is the inner voice. Spoiler alert for every Disney film since the early 1990s: You can be who you want to be. The hero lies within you.

This view of the world hides a dark underbelly. If who you are or what you become is a product of your free choices, then who you are is also your fault. You and you alone bear the entire weight of your own self-realization, your own meaning-making. No-one can help you in the search for the authentic you. You're on your own, buddy. We can remove some constraints, but beyond that? The best we can do is shrug and say: "Well, if that's what you've chosen, then good for you". We have freedom, prosperity, and agency. We also have some of the highest suicide rates in the world, we are beset by crippling anxiety, and we experience *acedia* (listlessness, purposelessness) on a scale unknown to the ancients.

Modernity has put a burden on humanity that we don't

have the capacity to bear. We simply were not made to generate our own meaning. We were made to be part of something bigger. Something cosmic.

The triple-decker universe spoke to this. It put human life in a bigger frame. It included a more complex set of assumptions and options by which to make sense of human choice, of guilt and suffering, of meaning and home. It had something to say when we hit up against the limits of our powers, the curtailments of our creatureliness. It confronted us with real responsibility for our sin, while relieving us of the impossible and oppressive responsibility of supplying our own meaning. Where modernity looks down over thick-rimmed reading glasses and says, "Well, maybe if you'd tried harder...", the ancient, transcendent view was more compassionate; expansive. It had room for us to understand ourselves as simultaneously victims and perpetrators, noble and base, free and enslaved, responsible and in need of rescue.

That's the Christian claim, at least. Which is what the rest of this book is about.