Magic and Modernity

An Interview on Theology, Religion and Crisis

Alan Macfarlane

King's College, University of Cambridge

am12@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

The following is a combination of excerpts transcribed from two events—an interview and a live Q&A—hosted by the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* (JOGTS) with Professor Alan Macfarlane in March 2021. We discussed the theme of "Theology, Religion and Crisis" in reference to his autobiographical work *Magic and Modernity*. A recording of the original interview is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J66FcEnz7Qs.

***Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* (JOGTS):** We're delighted to be talking today to Professor Alan Macfarlane on the theme of crisis and in connection with his forthcoming autobiographical work *Magic and Modernity*. Alan is a historian and anthropologist, Emeritus professor of Anthropological Science and a life fellow of King's College Cambridge. Thank you very much indeed for joining us, Alan. Do you want to start us off by giving us your short introduction to this theme of crisis?

Professor Alan Macfarlane (AM): Thank you very much for the introduction and thank you all for inviting me. It's a great pleasure to be back in Oxford, even if virtually and on this wet March day. I thought that the most useful thing, perhaps, would be to explain how crisis or crises are perennial, that your crises that you are facing are no different from the crises that I faced about 50 years ago when I was at Oxford. I thought that what I'd start with doing is just to outline a few of the crises which I had exactly at your age when I was doing my DPhil at Oxford in the 1960s. And the

Alan Macfarlane, "Magic and Modernity: An Interview on Theology, Religion and Crisis," *JOGTS* 2.1 (2021), pp. 51–64

message at the end, which I'll give you at the beginning, too, is that, if anything, the crises are less bad now than they were when I was at Oxford, and also that there are perfectly good and easy solutions to most of them if we just thought for a moment.

So, what were my crises? Well, the first and the deepest was, I think, an existential crisis in my relation to religion, because I'd been influenced by Christianity quite strongly as a child growing up. As a child, I also inhabited a world which I now look back on as enchanted, a world where things were connected with each other; nature and culture and different parts of my life, and I could go off into imaginary worlds with animals, and so on. So—those of you who know Wordsworth—my life was very like Wordsworth's because, in fact, I lived in the valley where Wordsworth grew up for fifteen years. And so, I grew up enchanted. But, gradually, and particularly at Oxford in my third year as an undergraduate, I felt that reason and rationality meant that I could no longer hold my life together in that way. My life was becoming separated and fragmented. Later, I discovered this was the great problem of later 19th century sociology. It's the problem that Marx faced with alienation, Durkheim faced with *anomie* and, above all, my hero Max Weber faced with the idea that we have a terrible choice: we can either have enchantment and magic and an integrated life, or we can have a rational, wealthy, modern, scientific existence, but we can't have both. And he talked about the famous iron cage in which we end up, which is very similar to Wordsworth's idea of alienation. So, I went through that, and I've now found a solution to this problem, at last, but it's been the theme of my life's work and it's the theme of the autobiography that you've just mentioned.

That was one main problem. A second one was that—having been brought up as a Christian but born in India, with the influence of my mother who was increasingly a Buddhist—I came to question monotheism. I felt: how was it possible that God would have designed a world in which there was only one truth? So, first of all, I questioned Christianity as a monotheistic creed, as explaining everything. Then, later, of course, the other monotheisms—Islam and Judaism. And I asked my Christian friends, "What happens to the Chinese who've never heard of Christ?", and they said, "Well, they're damned". And I couldn't accept this. This was a problem for me personally then, but it's one of the big existential problems, I think, now in the world—which is that the dominance of the West, and hence of Christianity and the monotheistic creeds, is giving way to a more polytheistic world where the influence of India and China and Japan, and so on, is much more powerful. And so, the question really is: "How are monotheisms and polytheisms going to live side by side?". That was the second problem.

The third set of problems was about pain, because I couldn't reconcile the God that I'd been taught was omnipotent and created the universe with the levels of suffering that I saw around me. I read books by C. S. Lewis on the problem of pain and so on, but I just couldn't find a solution to that, and there was a lot of pain around at that time. There was the Cuban Missile Crisis and

the possibility that the whole world would be annihilated. My own area in Assam had just been invaded by the Chinese at the end of 1962. The Vietnam War was just starting in 1964. And so, war was everywhere. Famine also: there were serious famines. The greatest famine of the 20th century was just ending when I was in my third year—that is the Great Leap Forward of Chairman Mao. We didn't know about it, but forty-million people had just died. But there was also a famine in Bangladesh, and so on. The world was filled with famine and, of course, a lot of disease: so that was another problem.

Another problem was ecological. Many people think that the ecological movement and the worries about destruction of the natural environment is a recent awareness. But in fact, at that time, in the mid-sixties, we were very concerned about that and particularly about the population problem. There were books coming out called *The Population Bomb* and there was a lot of work by people like Paul Ehrlich on the relations between humans and nature. So, we were really worried about population problems.

Now, the reaction to all these sorts of problems—the disintegration of meaning and all the rest of it, which I think is a problem that you're facing too—was fundamentalism. The way to eliminate contradiction and separation and loss of meaning is to reduce everything to some basic, structuring fundamental which will then explain everything and give everything a sense and a meaning, and you can get this fundamentalism in all sorts of forms. You can get it in economic fundamentalism, of a free-trade kind, or you can get it in religious fundamentalism, of the left or the right of various monotheistic and other religions, but the form of fundamentalism we particularly faced at that time was political fundamentalism. Even I was surprised when I was looking this up today: fascism was alive and well in southern Europe for some ten years after I was at Oxford. It was only in 1974 that Spain threw off the fascist yoke, and Greece and the colonels were just coming up, soon coming into power. Southern Europe was still fascist, and the fascist overwhelming of Europe was only a very recent memory. But, of course, the main worry was left-wing fundamentalism. We didn't know much about China and Chairman Mao, and we possibly would have been more worried if we had known more. But there was certainly the Soviet Union which was a great existential threat to us all.

So, we were worried about all sorts of crises. This is the nature of human beings. They live in the present mainly and they think that whatever they're facing is unprecedented, but perhaps the last thing I can end on is that having lived for nearly 80 years and looking back 50 years over my life and reading my letters and diaries and writing my autobiography, I can see that these things fluctuate and that the present crises are certainly no worse than they were. There are lots of statistics to show that war as a killer of human beings is far less of a disaster at the moment (as a proportion of human population) than it was in the sixties. Famine: we keep saying it's nearly gone, but it's certainly not as much of a problem as it was at the end of the 1960s. Disease, we have an

amazing control of. It may seem strange to say this in the middle of COVID, but, on the whole, the number of infants that die and the longevity of life is entirely different. When I was at Oxford most people would expect to die, on average, by their late seventies or eighties and now it's their late nineties. So, for many of the problems, and even with the ecological problems (at last we are coming to grips with these), there are many signs that we will find a solution to them. It won't be what we predict, and it'll be surprising, but I'm optimistic about that.

So, I think the problems are no worse and are largely soluble. The one that's interested me most in my autobiography is this first one—the problem of how we can live with both sides of the coin: both efficiency, rationality, wealth and so on, and also not lose a sense of identity and a sense of meaning in our lives and a sense of enchantment and magic. And it's taken me 80 years, nearly, to find out the solution to that.

JOGTS: Thank you. Just picking up on some of what you said, we are going to be asking questions about those solutions later, as we're very much interested in that. But our first question is: how do you actually define crisis?

AM: I suppose the obvious thing is that it's an extreme tipping point. It's like chaos theory. It's a moment when things come to a head. You take things as a normal tendency and trend and then suddenly they go off in another direction which is unpredictable. That's one of the main features of it—that most of our lives we can predict what's going to be happening tomorrow or the day after, but when there's a perturbation—it can be physical, it can be mental, it could be anything. I suppose it's the suddenness and the unpredictability and also the feeling that you've lost control and that you don't know what the solution is. If you bring all those things together, then you get a crisis.

JOGTS: Something that comes out in your autobiography is this connection between your own personal crisis of disenchantment and a kind of societal process of disenchantment. We were wondering if you could say a little bit more about what that connection is, between the personal and the societal?

AM: Well, it's been a theme of a lot of my work. Many academics think that you can understand ideas in a disembodied way, that if you look at the development of a great thinker you can write a biography of someone just as a biography of a kind-of brain. I've increasingly felt this is nonsense, even for people who look very rationalist like Descartes. If you read the *Discourse on the Method*, you'll see he said, "This is a history of my mind"; but he said he was going to say, "This is a history of my life". Basically, we are animals. We receive information and we process information through the whole of our body. So, our life and our work cannot be separated at all. It's normally very difficult to actually investigate this because most people who write their autobiographies are doing it through memory. Therefore, they just remember the ideas. But because I can reconstruct my

life—because I didn't throw anything much away from the age of fifteen or sixteen—my volumes are filled with what I was eating, where I was going, who I was interacting with, letters to my friends, and so on. So, I can see the coalescence. Later, in the account of enchantment, it's quite clear that if I hadn't gone to Nepal and found another, enchanted, magical world and then gone on to Japan and then China, my experience would've been completely different.

In a way it's central to anthropology. As you probably know, the method of anthropology is called participant observation, and I've recently come to realise that this is the method of human beings. From the moment you're born, how do you learn about the world? You learn about it through participant observation and that participation is not largely, even, through language or conscious, rational thought. It's through physical absorption and experiences. You both experience heat and cold and love and hate but you also think about them at the same time. So, we are all born anthropologists, and it's the interaction between these kinds of experience that I find interesting. So, very small chance things—a person you meet, or a certain place you go to—affect all that you are. And so, there are many things I can't really understand. There were many things probably going on in Oxford at that time which were influencing me indirectly and my trajectory. But I can see now how much my experiences as an undergraduate and postgraduate, and then going to these countries, shaped me.

JOGTS: You've talked a lot about moving from a magical and enchanted world to a more rational but less meaningful world. Do you think that, in this disenchanted world that you describe, it's an individual's duty to formulate their own reference of meaning, especially now that there's a breakdown of traditional religious beliefs? Or do you envision there being a need for new traditions to be formed?

AM: Well, it's not just a need. We are constantly forming new traditions. There's a lot of literature and anthropology about the invention of tradition. We have to live within traditions. We are animals that need our social and imaginative lives, and we are constantly renewing them because the old ones become stale, or we no longer accept them. So, every day that we wake up we invent new traditions and ideas. And that is very important. In relation to the first part, I think self-awareness is essential. I was always struck by the idea of John Stuart Mill about how we can understand our lives. He said that the sources of knowledge about life and about the middle level tendencies or structures which affect our lives are learnt from two main sources. One is from history, from looking at what happened in the past, which doesn't repeat itself, but you see patterns of certain kinds. And the other is from self-awareness and interrogating yourself. And that's clearly what Descartes was doing, and what most philosophers do. So, there are various ways of speeding this up or making it more efficient. For example, keeping a diary. Any kind of externalisation of your self—writing, I've found, is one of the ways, and other people have other art forms—but if you can stand back from yourself, externalise who you are and what your

problems are, that often makes them explicit. Because (and this is another theme of my work), as soon as you understand the problem, either historically or in your own life, then you can usually think of a way out of it. The problem is the confusion or the muddle which you are in before you've actually located it. And this is why understanding modernity and understanding that there's this tension between different parts of our lives—between the economic, political, religious, intellectual—is so important. That tension and separation is what I find modernity to mean. Now, as soon as you realise that everyone faces this, and that you're not the only one who feels this, and that it is actually built into the structure of modern societies, as soon as you understand that it is inevitable and you can see it for what it is, then you can start to address it and maybe get round it and realise there are perfectly good solutions to this. But as long as you don't understand it, and you don't understand yourself, you'll be stuck. One of my favourite poets is Alexander Pope and one of my favourite parts of Pope is the *Essay on Man*: "Know then thyself; presume not God to scan. The proper study of mankind, is man."

JOGTS: Thank you, Alan. Our next question is about the nature of disenchantment and whether you think that disenchantment is itself a form of crisis? We're particularly thinking here about those narratives which suggest that indigenous cultures live more peacefully and in greater harmony with each other and the environment.

AM: Well, if it's a crisis, it doesn't quite fit into my definition because it's perennial. I mean, not perennial, but certainly tens of years, hundreds of years. The location of the crisis in Europe, as I say, is the second half of the 19th century. Sociology—modern sociology and social science—grew up out of that particular crisis: the loss of religious faith and integration. So, it's not a single event crisis. But when a separation of this kind occurs in a traditional society which has held things together (nature and culture and all these things) it does and can form a serious crisis. A lot of the anthropological literature on Millenarianism, books like *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (by Peter Worsley) and Kenelm Burridge's work and all those books have shown that if you go to, say, some Melanesian society, and you bring in western capitalism, money values, all the things that split us apart (all the tools of civilisation are separating tools, like writing, or money, or cities, or division of labour), if you bring those in, what you usually get is a reaction where you demand a solution by expelling the thing or saying, "Let's bring it all together". I mean, it's a pretty obvious fact that the populist movements that swept the world in the last few years like Donald Trump, or Brexit, or Bolsonaro, and so on, are partly a reaction to this crisis. In other words, they indicate a loss of meaning and a sense that things are getting out of hand and your identity is being threatened. There's also a lot of work on, for example, missionising in South America which shows that the growth of fundamentalist Christian churches, and also in Africa, was partly a reaction to this kind of splitting apart. And so, I think there is a relationship between them.

What interests me, though, is how some cultures managed to overcome it. And these were lessons I learned, for example, from Japan. Japan, on which I wrote a book, is a wonderful example of a big civilisation which was faced, in the later 19th century, by Western power and domination, Western markets, Western everything. And it appeared to somehow absorb it. It absorbed the bits it wanted but kept out the bits it didn't want. My thesis in the book is that basically Japan is still an ancient, shamanic civilisation, under the surface. It holds up a mirror which shows it to be modern and the rest of it inside is entirely different. Now, I think that to a certain extent, China (I thought Japan was just an exception) is doing the same sort of thing. It looks very modern, and it looks as if it's absorbing everything in the West, but it's also retaining its inner core. So, it's quite possible to do that, and I think parts of Europe do the same thing. But this is alright for a big civilisation like China or Japan. If you're a small tribe in New Guinea and suddenly you're hit by missionaries, by markets, by outside political systems, you can become very disoriented.

JOGTS: To move on a bit, in your book, you give a very interesting account of prayer. For example, you write that: "To say a 'Hail Mary', '*Om Mane Padme Om*' or 'God is Great', changes the world and brings us into closer touch with something beyond space and time". We were wondering, what do you think about prayer as a way of kindling enchantment and a way of transforming our perception of the world?

AM: You've read my book more recently than I have. I had forgotten about that. I mean, anthropologists and linguists believe that words—elocution and the actual sound of words—have power. In other words, they are a form of magic, which is defined as a sequence, a repetitive sequence, of symbols which affect the world. Now, whether it works, as believers would have, by putting you in touch with some other reality or whether it affects us just psychologically, because you believe, that I don't know. But anyone knows you just need two words. My favourite ones are "let's pretend" with my granddaughters. When they were younger, they would say, or I'd say, "Let's pretend we're tigers". And we were tigers. And prayer can be a device. You just say this, and then (well, to the outsider—Protestants, for example, hated it and called it mumbo jumbo, and so on; but, for a Catholic or a believer) it actually has the force and power to move you out of one dimension into another dimension. It unlocks another dimension. So, it can be very powerful. But one of my disappointments and one of the reasons, I suppose, I ended up without remaining a formal Christian, was that the prayer never seemed to be echoed in any way. I went through a very evangelical period. I was a member of *OICCU*, which you'll know is the *Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union*. I was told that I could say prayers and I would feel that there was something there, that I was speaking to something. But I never really felt that. I just felt I was asking or saying things and so it wasn't very effective. But, of course, all of us pray all the time. I mean, you'll find, I'm sure, Richard Dawkins and others on a dark night, when suddenly something spooky happens, or their car is about to crash, throw a prayer up to heaven. It's a normal reaction to all sorts of stresses.

JOGTS: You mentioned earlier that you'd—after many, many years—found a solution as to how this generation might build a world where reason and heart exist together. How do you envisage this?

AM: Well, this is the surprise of writing the first volume of my autobiography in the early months of COVID. Because, by externalising the problem, by giving an account of my life's work (a lot of my work is around the theme of disenchantment), I took myself through from childhood and through the growing up, and the Wordsworthian thing, to Oxford and beyond, and showed how it was quite normal and absolutely obvious that I would separate my lives and I would lose my faith. And, if I had remained a historian, probably that's where I would be now. But this was changed by going to other cultures and getting the shock of finding worlds where magic and enchantment still exists, and the head and the heart are united, and things have a meaning—this was my first shock when visiting Nepal and then Japan and then China. But the surprise in the book was that having gone through this mentally, in that few weeks of writing, I then came back and looked around my own world and it was just like all the fairy stories. I'll give you just a very personal example. My beloved granddaughter, Lily, when she went into a big wardrobe in my room in King's College which belonged to John Maynard Keynes. She went in and I said, “This is Narnia” and she said, “Oh, yes, it's very cold in here. I can see the White Witch”, and so on. And then she hopped out and she just looked round, and she said, “The whole world's changed”.

Now, *Alice in Wonderland,* all these different children's stories and a lot of poetry, Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale,* and much poetry and literature, is about how when we experience entry into another dimension, you come back, and your world is different. And so, when I came back, in the book and in my mind, and looked around me and started to examine my life, if I looked at my life over twenty-four hours—or if you looked at your lives—how much of it is lived in a cold, rational iron cage of separations and divisions? Hardly any of it. Nearly all of it (analysing things like play and games, art and literature, love, even drink, and so on), if you look at what you do and how you are affected by what you do, let alone the eight hours you're dreaming, these are not rational at all. Again, I saw this with Lily. I was reading to her when she was about four or five, and the moment I said, “It was a cold night on the mountain”, her eyes sort of looked up. I filmed it and I could see. She was away. She was in that mountain. Now, when you read a novel, when you watch a film, when you play a game, when you watch a game, when you have a conversation with someone you like and play mental games, you are not in the cold, rational world. Human beings are mostly imaginative creators of alternative realities. And, therefore, instead of worrying, I offer this, another line of poetry I like from Shelley: “Many a green isle needs must be, In the deep wide sea of misery”. And I thought of the kind of enchantment which all of us fill our lives with as green islands, or oases, as I sometimes describe it, in a desert. If we didn't have all these things, being rational and common sense, and separating, and thinking about money, and thinking about the next chapter of our PhD thesis, or whatever it is, that would be intolerable. We escape all the

time into daydreams or a game of this-or-that. And so, we haven't lost this, we can combine the two. And that's the final chapter of my autobiography, it's how it solves the problem which Max Weber took forward and then Ernest Gellner, my teacher (he's a philosopher and an anthropologist). We can be both: rational, tolerant, liberal, and fairly efficient, but also live a very rich imaginative life.

Audience (AUD): The climate crisis pervades the framework of modernity that you've written about; the division of the religious, economic, social, and political aspects of our lives. This crisis affects and is affected by all of these, and it also affects people regardless of nationality, gender, or ethnicity, and it often affects the most vulnerable members of society and, of course, future generations—people that we will never even meet. What do you think of some of the theological or religious issues this crisis may have stemmed from, and what do you see as some of the solutions?

AM: Well, as you say, it tends to affect—like all disasters—the poor, and the weak, and people in marginal countries more than others, as I've seen in my work in Nepal and elsewhere. Just two thoughts on it. One is that we need to change our whole attitude about the opposition between humans and nature. In other words: I was brought up with the Old Testament view that man has dominion over nature and that nature is just there to serve him or her, basically. Whereas a soon as you actually feel part of nature and feel some empathy and sympathy with it, then you are more likely to treat it in a more respectful and reasonable way. Although, as I said, I think there's been terrible ecological and other destruction in places like China. They have a view of nature as not separate from human beings; in many ways they regard nature as their responsibility, and they are part of it. But that requires a big shift, particularly in Christianity and some of the Western religions which have this domination view and is built up by science.

As regards what we can do about it: basically, if you try and solve problems at the level at which they are created you will never solve them. If we just think, "Well, let's just have a few more solar panels or let's have a little more of this, plant some trees or something", which they're doing now, that's tinkering at the edge of it. We actually need absolutely huge and fundamental shifts. I mean, everyone knows that if you spent ten percent of what the world spends on weapons now—ten percent—you would solve almost all the ecological and other problems; the problems of water shortages, for example, and deforestation. Many of these things, with thought and care—not only the billions of dollars that would be available for this sort of activity, but also the people who are spending huge amounts of energy, and skill, and science, and technology on learning how to kill other people—could be devoted to improving our planet.

AUD: I just wanted to go back to when you were talking about your granddaughter and your mention of Narnia and Keats. Obviously, a fantastical work with Christian undertones and a

Romantic work with classical undertones. I was wondering, in terms of enchantment, is it different from Romanticism? And if so, how?

AM: That's a very nice question. They overlap. There's a Venn overlap because the great period for enchanted literature, in my life, was the Romantic movement, but it's overlapping because that was a particularly rich time. You're talking about 1770-1830, or whatever it is, in England, and other periods on the continent, and it clearly was related to disenchantment—that is, industrialism and science and the feeling that the meaning of the world was being drained away. And so, it was particularly rich then and I was affected by it. A lot of my work is around this theme because I was brought up in the same place where William Wordsworth went to school, and so his great work on enchantments and disenchantment, *The Prelude,* was written around the fields and houses which I knew as a boy. He was my hero—and Keats and Shelley and the rest of them too.

I'll just tell you the story from my book [*Magic and Modernity*], the first volume, which is that I thought I was growing up to be like Wordsworth, fading into the light of common day, and losing the mystery, and bars of the prison house growing around me, and all the Wordsworthian stuff. This went on through university, and I thought, "I've lost it all". I read children's stories, I read C. S. Lewis as an undergraduate at Oxford to try and preserve this enchanted world, but, in the end, it escaped me, and I thought, "I've lost it". Then, I went to the Himalayas and I re-found it, and I went to Japan and found it even more, and then I went to China and found it even more. So, I discovered that three-quarters of the world lives within enchanted universes. I came back to my own world, and I looked around, and I suddenly realised—and this is the same as coming out of Lily's cupboard and Narnia—I looked around, and I saw that enchantment was all around me. It's just a matter of the definition, if you redefine religion in the sort of way that Durkheim does: that the sacredness is things set apart, or out of ordinary time and space, or with different rules. If you apply a slightly broader definition, it means that the cold, calculating rules that you have to abide by in normal logic and normal economics and normal politics, and all those sorts of things—those are for a time suspended. When you suspend them—and my book takes firstly "play", all sorts of play—the moment you start playing a game of football, you're in enchantment. *Homo Ludens*, as Huizinga put it. We are playful creatures and all that is enchanted because it has its own rules. I've played these games with Lily, my granddaughter. Then, we stop and have a meal, and we are no longer in that enchanted world. So, I watched and filmed my granddaughters growing up in enchantment and I have written a very long autobiography of my own life, in many volumes, about enchantment and growing out of it. So, that's in play.

In painting, when you look at a Constable or a Goya or a Leonardo, you enter another dimension, another world. Above all when you listen to music. You just have to learn to listen to two or three notes of your favourite music—of classical, of pop, or jazz, or whatever—and human beings are taken into a new world. This is why Plato was against all the arts: because he said they lead us

into unreality and deception. But, in fact, that is what keeps us and makes us human. Then I go into a chapter of all the other things: love, friendship, a glass of wine, whatever it is. A single individual is in an enchanted world for something like three-quarters, or more, of their time—from the moment they turn on the radio and listen to some music, or they pick up a newspaper and they travel to another part of the world—their mind is somewhere outside this confining "here and now". So, most people, most of the time, live in parallel realities.

AUD: That reminds me of—I can't remember if it was Lewis or Tolkien—something they said about when you're a child you read fairy stories, and if you're lucky when you're old enough, you'll read fairy stories again. And your journey seems to remind me of that. I was wondering how this enchanted world and this more kind of "civil" world of, "I've got to pay my taxes, I've got to get on this train", could live together. Do you think there could ever be (what I imagine the medieval world was) a coalescence between the civil and the enchanted, where there isn't as clear a distinction between them, or do you think industrialisation and technology have forever sundered the two?

AM: Well, on the first point: that we as children read children's stories, but if we're lucky as adults we also read children's stories—that is obviously what we should do. You can never too often read children's stories. They always have a new meaning and richness to them and I'm just about to start Kipling again. He is one of my favourites. It reminds me of Einstein. It's not quite the same, but it's one of my favourite quotes. He said that: "The reason why I solved this large problem of relativity, is not because I'm any cleverer than anyone else, I'm just the same as everyone else. It's because when I was a child I asked these questions that a child asks about space, and time, and why, and so on, and so on. And everyone said, 'Oh, well, stop asking those questions. When you grow up you can ask those questions, you might have a chance of answering them then.'" But he didn't stop asking them and when he grew up, he went on asking the child-like question of "why, why, why" and this led him to his amazing work.

I think there is this thesis of my former DPhil supervisor Keith Thomas, who wrote a very good book called *Man and the Natural World,* based on the Trevelyan lectures, in which he argued that industrialisation and the Romantic movement, in fact, was a move—a shift—a break which you can't go back over. In other words: you've lost innocence. It's industrialism plus science. And this was the supposed tragedy of the 19th century, that we can't go back to enchantment because we live in an industrial world and a scientific world. I sort of half accepted this, although, in fact, I find the break much earlier than Keith, and I've written about this in one of my books. So, I find the tension between science and an enchanted world going back into the medieval period. But I now don't see them in opposition. Science gives you answers to certain things, but it doesn't give you answers to any of the "why" questions. It's good on the "how" questions, and some of the great scientists I've interviewed are also theologians and give very good answers on that. And I don't see

any reason at all why you shouldn't accept and respect good science, but also accept that it doesn't give you the answers to all the possible questions, and it may never do so.

AUD: I am interested in relating your ideas to the work of people like Jason Josephson-Storm in his book *The Myth of Disenchantment*, or Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern.* You talked earlier about China and Japan, where you suggested that modernity is just a veneer and that, underneath, these societies have always been enchanted. Do you think the same is possibly true of Western societies as well? That the disenchantment, the Weberian iron cage, was something of a myth, and we've always retained this enchanted sense?

AM: I think you're using myth in the common sense. In other words, as meaning "untrue", which anthropologists certainly baulk at. A myth is something which is useful for society because it explains how things are, and how they should be, and their history. So, it's a myth in the usual, functional sense: that if you are trying to create something, or understand your world, you create these stories about yourself, and the story of disenchantment is a story which for quite good reasons people have told. Then other people question them. And Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* is an example of that, and it's a very useful debunking. I do rather tease Bruno because my view is that the French have never been modern, because basically they're Catholic and familial and state-oriented and they've never made the proper separations, which is the problem that France constantly faces because that is all still embedded. I'm in a good heritage because Tocqueville says the same thing: that the French Revolution never succeeded in making us modern. So, the French are certainly not modern.

And the English are like the Japanese. We present a reasonable front to the world. We'd like to believe this, and it's probably necessary. It's very similar to a device in law. If any of you know about how English common law works, it's based on the concept of the "reasonable man". It's based on the idea that if you're judging a case, and if you are interrogating witnesses, you have to assume that they are reasonable. You apply this judgment of the "reasonable man" to economics—*homo economicus* is someone who makes constant calculations about the costs and benefits of transactions. Now, we all know that economics is based on nonsense—that people are not economically rational most of the time. And that individuals in their private behaviour, and so on, are often not reasonable. But it's a fiction which serves all sorts of useful purposes because it gives you a sort of rule of behaviour in a certain aspect of your lives. And so, I think the idea is that in normal transactions we have to be reasonable. If we don't do that we will end up in a mess. On the other hand, if that's all we do we'll end up in another kind of psychological and miserable mess.

JOGTS: So, to finish: what would be some advice you would give to all of us in trying to turn perceived crises into hope?

AM: Well, I tried to do this throughout. Basically, here I am, at the end of nearly eighty years and the crises that I faced when I was your age are less severe than they were then. But also, they go on and there's always a new one. And if there's no crisis, you invent one. So, perhaps have a sheet of paper by your side and when a new crisis comes along, write it down, and then underneath say "what crisis?", okay?!

JOGTS: That's brilliant, Professor Macfarlane, thank you. This has given us a whole new perspective on some of the larger issues we are facing today and a more hopeful and perhaps more useful way to look at what we describe as a "crisis". This has been a wonderfully insightful interview, and it's been a great privilege for The Journal of the Oxford Graduate Society.

Select References

Burrage, Champlin. *The Fifth Monarchy Insurrections*. London, 1910.

Ehrlich, Paul R. *The Population Bomb*. New York: Buccaneer Books, 1971.

Gell, Alfred, and Eric Hirsch. "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology." *The Art of Anthropology*, 2020, 159–86. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003136545-6.

Gray, John. *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. London: Granta, 2003.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*. Madrid: Alianza, 1998.

Josephson-Storm, Jason Ađnanda. *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago press, 2017.

Keats, John. *Ode to a Nightingale*. Poetry Foundation. Accessed 3 April 2021. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44479/ode-to-a-nightingale.

Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.

Macfarlane, Alan. *Japan through the Looking Glass*. London: Profile, 2008.

Macfarlane, Alan. *How can we Survive? Thoughts for Taras*. California: CreateSpace, 2016.

Macfarlane, Alan. *Oxford Undergraduate 1960-3*. Independently Published, 2019.

Macfarlane, Alan. *Oxford Postgraduate 1963-6*. Independently Published, 2019.

Pope, Alexander. *An Essay on Man: Epistle II.* Poetry Foundation. Accessed 3 April 2021. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44900/an-essay-on-man-epistle-ii.

Pope, Alexander. *The Rape of the Lock: Canto 1*. Poetry Foundation. Accessed 3 April 2021. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44906/the-rape-of-the-lock-canto-1.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills*. Poetry Foundation. Accessed 3 April 2021. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45127/lines-written-among-the-euganean-hills.

Thomas, Keith. *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800*. London: Penguin, 2003.

Wordsworth, William. "The Prelude: Book 1: Childhood and School-time," *The Prelude*. Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation. Accessed 3 April 2021. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45542/the-prelude-book-1-childhood-and-school-time.